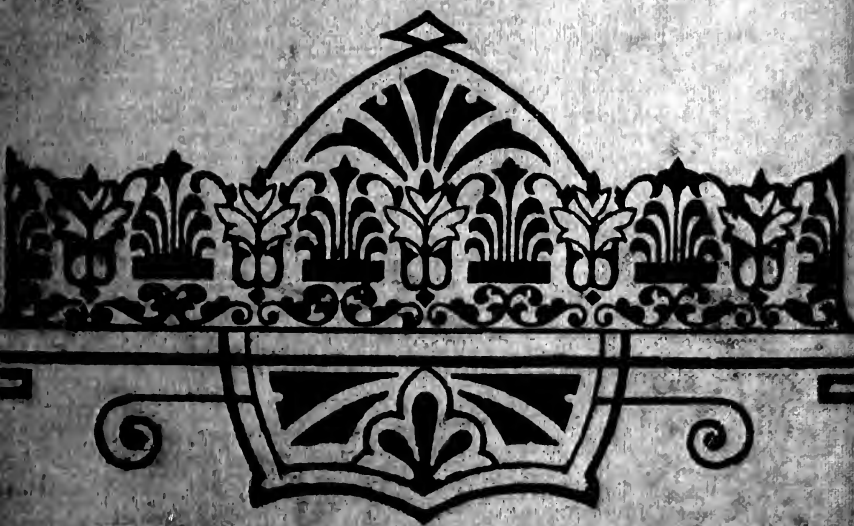




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BY

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AND

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ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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LED ON.



VOLUME II.

CHAPTER I.

FREE.

MADGE MANNERS edged close to her husband's side, with the consciousness that she had been in the presence of "something evil." It was not by "the pricking of her thumbs" that she became aware of the fact, but by a psychological instinct that had nothing to do with her former opinion of Mrs. Schonk. Under the influence of this instinct she felt it was doubly good to have a husband to love and protect her; and as she looked up

into his grave face, her whole heart went out to him on a wave of tenderness.

“ Oh, Hugh, what should I do without you ? ” she exclaimed impulsively.

Instead of answering, he pointed with his whip to the high hedge. “ Did you see that nest ? ” he asked, as if she had not spoken.

She was not in the mood to care for any amount of nests at the moment, but she went so far as to say, “ No,” and gave a look over her shoulder out of respect for her husband’s question.

Whilst they were driving home in the cool of the day, looking forward to the pleasant, cosy evening they were going to spend together, Mrs. Schonk stood like a post, staring at the violets. There was something in their excessive sweetness which reminded her of Mrs. Manners, the only woman in the world who could have had the smallest influence over her granite nature. The tone of her voice, the look in her gentle, truthful eyes, had a powerful effect upon her, though she fought against it with the whole strength of

her indomitable will. To-night, strange to say, they had more power over her than ever before, and as she realised the cold-blooded cruelty of which she had been guilty during the past few months, and of which she intended to be guilty in the week to come, as she thought of the child whom she was driving to the grave, as remorselessly as political convicts are driven in gangs to the tomb of Siberia, she was aghast at her own wickedness. It was a hideous revelation of that inner self, which she had ignored, to her own outer consciousness. It rose up and faced her, as the evening-star stole out from behind a fleecy cloud into the calm beauty of the opal sky, and for a moment she shuddered as she knew herself for what she was—a cruel, crafty, slaughter-loving panther in the shape of a woman! How that Mrs. Manners would shrink and gather up her skirts for fear lest they should touch her as she passed, if she only knew! A little, innocent girl, for she really was no more than a girl, who was innocent because she had never known temptation, and because she believed in a

God who could punish, and a hell which was always ready for sinners! There was no merit in goodness such as that, and even if there were a heaven such as she had so often talked of to the child, there could be no place in it for Arabella Schonk. No, it was all a pack of rubbish, and the only thing worth worrying after was a bit of money. There was something substantial in that. When you had it, there was no doubt about it, and as death was a fact as well, of which no one with a grain of sense could doubt, it was wise to get it as soon as you could, and to make the most of it, as long as you could enjoy it, "And so I will," she said defiantly, with a hard, cold glance at the star which seemed to represent to her at the moment all the beauty of virtue, and the holiness of faith. She turned her back upon it resolutely, and went into the house, prepared to make up for her momentary halt on the path of vice by renewed vigour of action. She put the flowers into a glass of water, not because she cared for them, but simply because she objected to waste anything however small. Then she stood

still and listened. There was no sound of life inside that quiet house. Jess had probably cried herself into the facile sleep of childhood ; and the other one had no doubt quieted down into the numbness of exhaustion.

Feeling safe from all interruption, Mrs. Schonk fetched a common-looking desk, and set it on the table before her. Having unlocked it, she took out three or four insurance books, and studied them intently. There was nothing wrong, every premium had been paid up to date, and if anything happened to Ruth Mary Schonk, to put it euphoniously, there would be no difficulty in getting the money. Being perfectly satisfied on that score, she ate her supper with a good appetite. She knew that she had committed an illegal act by insuring a child in more offices than one, but she had already discovered that it was by no means impossible to evade the law if she were fortunate enough to meet with people as unscrupulous as herself. When she had tidied up, looked at her new bonnet—a black one trimmed with *crêpe*—and tried it on, she thought it was about time to release

her prisoner. But when she opened the door, she found she was a little too late. Someone had been before her, and Ruth was happy and at rest, though with only coals for her pillow and the black grimy dust for her shroud, for she had gone to sleep in a coal-hole, and awoke in the Paradise of God! And Arabella Schonk looked down at her victim, her face ghastly with the terror of success.

.

The time for drawing back was gone. The child's fate was out of her hands now, and she had only her own to consider. Her mother or somebody else, perhaps, had told her a story of a man named Judas who sold his master for thirty pieces of silver. He must have been a fool not to have made a better bargain, she reflected. What she would get for this child was paltry enough, but it would be, at least, from twenty to thirty pounds in gold. Her eyes glittered at the thought of the money, and yet a creepy feeling came over her as she looked at the still figure lying on the small bed

to which she had carried it. It was so very still—so unlike the active, high-spirited, sharp-tongued imp who had tried so hard in her small way to give her as good as she gave—though it was always such a gigantic failure. The ugly little face with its new dignity of repose haunted her as she put on her bonnet and cloak. She must fetch the doctor at once, and get the certificate signed in time to stifle all inquiries. It was imperatively necessary that there should be no delay. As she hastily tied her bonnet-strings, she thought she would obliterate the remembrance of that white little face—so awful in its utter emaciation, whose sunken cheeks, and fleshless nose, and hollow eyes, told a tale for all to read—by looking on another, which she knew must be healthy, plump, and rosy. She went up to the tiny cot, which had been moved into the corner of her own room since Death had taken possession of the children's bare apartment, and looked down on Jess with a certain amount of self-gratulation. Here, at least, was a specimen of health and

beauty such as the carefulest mother would be proud to produce. As she looked, the long silken lashes lifted, the child's blue eyes stared up into the cold stern face above it. A hazy recollection of the events of the past day came across her small brain with a vague sense of trouble. "Where's 'Uth?" she asked, with a droop about the corners of her baby-mouth.

Mrs. Schonk frowned. "Go to sleep, child. Ruth's gone to bed long ago."

"You are sure she's in bed—not down there?" very earnestly.

"Yes, she's in bed, sure enough."

"I'll give her a wose to-morrow." And as if this were a great satisfaction to her mind, she turned her golden head into a more comfortable position, and went to sleep with a smile on her pretty lips.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Schonk was hurrying up the road towards Dr. Ford's house. He was at home, having just returned from a dinner at "The Red Lion." He had drunk just enough to make him noisily cheerful; and it required all the

strength of her will to induce him to turn his attention to business. But Mrs. Schonk was not to be beaten. She coaxed, implored, threatened, till at last he consented to have out his cart and come. He took her with him, for she was too wise to leave him before he started. And he grumbled all the way. As she opened the door the moonlight fell full on her face, for she turned it towards him to see if he were following. It was white as the moonlight itself, but with a calmness on it that spoke of fierceness kept under restraint, and which was far removed from peace. He knew her well, and yet it startled him.

“A she-devil—a veritable she-devil!” he said to himself, as he stepped over the threshold.

She played the part of a devil that night if ever a woman did. She loved this man after a fashion. She had known him from a boy. She had taken an interest in his career. She knew that his career was endangered by his propensity for drink. She had warned him against it time after time, and yet, now that intoxication would play into her hands, she

brought out a bottle of fine old whisky, and would not let him stir till he had taken one glass after another, always suggesting a toast which an Irishman would find it hard to refuse. She was beset with the fear of consequences, now that her cruel scheme had come to its climax; and courageous woman as she undoubtedly was, to that fear she would have sacrificed anything or anybody within her reach. Nothing was safe that could by any means promote her safety; not even the friendship which had grown with her growth, and become the one tenderness of her severely practical life. She would undoubtedly prefer that Patrick Ford should become a hopeless drunkard, than that the slightest breath of suspicion should rest on Arabella Schonk. When the whisky had done its work she led him upstairs, and showed him Ruth's poor little wizened face by the light of a flickering candle. He stared at it stupidly, searching for a thought lost in the fog of his brain. What was it? There was something about this child that he ought to remember. He had had some idea about the cause of her ill-

ness, some idea which was very important, and which had been gathering force during the last few weeks. Dash it all! What was it? He would have given a good deal if he could have caught hold of it, and grasped it, but it eluded him like a slippery eel.

Mrs. Schonk touched his arm. "Come down," she said quietly. She had not the slightest tinge of remorse for what she had done, but in spite of her iron nerves she derived no positive enjoyment from contemplating the ghastly result of her work. Patrick Ford went stumblingly down the narrow staircase, almost missing his footing in his persistent search for his lost idea.

"You remember that she died of galloping consumption," she said in her metallic voice, as she pushed pen and ink towards him across the spotless kitchen-table. "You said it was that when you saw her last week."

"Did I say so? Can you swear it?" he asked hoarsely, as he pulled a paper out of his pocket.

"As sure as I stand here, those were your very words," she said, with the perspiration

gathering in large drops upon her forehead, for no one knew better than she herself how much hung on the issue of the next few minutes—"galloping consumption, a sunken chest, and general debility. You couldn't have put it plainer, and you wound up with a foreign word beginning with an 'M.'"

No wonder that she knew it all by heart, as it was to save her from a coroner's inquest, the terrible chances of a trial, public exposure, and the Nemesis of a sentence.

Even then he doubted her, and held the pen irresolutely in his hand. "I'd back you for lying against any other woman in England," he said slowly, and passed his other hand across his forehead, as if in the futile effort to brush away the cloud on his brain. "I'll come again ; good-night," and he made a lurch towards the door, dimly conscious that he was not in a fit state to judge of a serious matter. He was not a bad fellow, altogether, but that one misadventure of his life, when a patient named Mrs. Askew died through wrong treatment, because he attended her in a state of intoxication, had

been the ruin of him. It was always there like a grim shadow in the back-ground of his mind. A hateful memory! The moral cowardice of an hour when he allowed a woman to lie for him, had cost him every shred of his self-respect, and that is known to be one of the most dangerous things that can happen to any man. Having plenty of pluck, it yet condemned him to feel a coward, an exasperating thought for a brave man. To get away from it, he took to the very thing which had brought this curse upon him, and as the years passed on he grew more and more reckless. Having lost his good opinion of himself, he soon did not care the value of a straw for the good opinion of the world, and thus threw away one of the best safe-guards of untheistic morality. This was after the advent of Mrs. Schonk, the woman who reminded him of the terrible past, and threatened his future. He knew that she would be pitiless to him if he crossed her will; and yet he was man enough in his sober moments to do his duty and defy her. He meant to do it now, but his

brain was confused, and he was incapable of a steady purpose.

As he moved, Mrs. Schonk stepped forward and interposed her substantial figure, as well as her set determination, between the doctor and the door. "You are not going, Mr. Patrick," purposely returning to the old formula by which she used to address him in his father's house. "I wouldn't let you leave my house at this time of night with a dry throat. Have another drop now, just to drink my health."

"Not a drop, not a drop," he said hastily, but he watched her as she filled a glass to the brim, and pushed it towards him. The thirst for it grew upon him, and, throwing prudence to the winds, he slipped into a chair as he took it in his shaky hand. "After this, I'm off," he said, with his last glimmer of resolution; but Mrs. Schonk knew that he would not go till he had done what she meant him to do. Her will was in the ascendant, whilst his was drowned in that last glass of whisky.

Half an hour later, she took him by the

coat-sleeve and led him to the gate. The horse, accustomed to standing at any amount of gates and doors during the day, had only strayed a few yards to nibble some of the fresh green off a hedge. His master swore at him as he caught hold of the reins and clambered in, but the horse was accustomed to that also, and went on his homeward way philosophically, too eager for his stable to require any guidance from the man behind him. Mrs. Schonk wasted no time in looking after the doctor, though she ought to have been filled with fears for his safety. She had got all she wanted out of him, so for the present he might take his chance. In her stupendous selfishness, she was entirely engrossed with her own success. The certificate of death was there duly signed, and Ruth's sharp tongue would never be able to cast the lie in her face. Soon she would be safe under the sod, and Arabella Schonk would hear the jingle of gold in her pocket. She would not be such a fool as to offer to give it back, like that man Judas—no, twenty pounds was too large a handful to be thrown away for a

sentiment—and, when she had once got hold of it, she meant to enjoy it in her own way. She put away all that remained of the whisky in a cupboard, for she had no intention of addling her own wits, though it had answered her purpose so well to confuse the doctor's. The precious certificate, which stated that Ruth Martin had died of marasmus, she locked up in the same desk with the insurance books. It was too late to go to the undertaker's, too late to post any letters, so she thought she had better retire to bed. As she looked round to see if there were anything else to tidy up, her eye fell on the violets. The sight of them was too much for her, with their silent accusation. They spoke to her too plainly of Mrs. Manners' love for the dead child, and with a hasty step forward, she clutched them out of the glass, undid the door, though it was fastened up for the night, and hurrying to the side of the garden, flung them over the hedge on to a heap of rubbish. Then she returned to the house, went to bed, and slept the sleep of the vicious woman whose conscience has been numbed by the anodyne of constant sin.

CHAPTER II.

“SENT OFF LIKE A BAGMAN!”

MADGE could not help noticing that her husband was unusually silent during dinner. Watching him anxiously but with wise unobtrusiveness, she gradually became convinced that he had something on his mind, and she meant to know all about it before she went to bed. They strolled down to the banks of the river, Hugh pointing out a fish now and then with his cigar, Madge looking after it with great interest, having been educated up to interest herself in such matters, because her husband was so skilful with his rod ; but after a time they found themselves such a prey to the midges, that they returned up the shadowy path under the trees which clothed the sloping ground to the terrace-walk before the drawing-room windows.

There they settled themselves on two easy-chairs, which Manners fetched out of the house.

"I don't think I ever saw the place looking prettier," Hugh said with a sigh which did not seem to belong to the words.

"That sounds like a convict's last remark on the world. I expect he would think it never looked half so lovely before." Her hands were clasped on his knee, her large eyes fixed in earnest study on his face. "You are keeping something back from me, Hugh, and I won't stand it!" she went on with a catch in her breath.

"I was wondering if Violet could be persuaded to tear herself away from Devonshire," he said slowly.

"Oh, you dear old darling, what an exquisite idea!" she exclaimed joyfully. "Only give her the chance, and I am sure she would fly. But what put it into your head?"

He looked away from her over the tree tops, as if he could not bear to see the change that would come into her face, as he said with a poor assumption of indifference,

"Because old Whiffin is growing uneasy about affairs in Spain. He has these attacks periodically, you know—but this time it's serious, and he can't get over it."

"You mean that you will have to go?" she asked quickly, as the colour flew into her face. "Do you know, I think it will be no end of fun. I sha'n't mind it a bit. Why do you look so solemn?"

"My dear little woman, do you think I could take you to San José? Why, the mosquitoes would spoil your beauty in half an hour."

"As if I cared about that," she cried indignantly, as the fear that had been growing on her took a tangible shape. "I won't stay behind—I declare I won't. Oh, Hugh!" with passionate entreaty in her grey eyes, and in every line of her figure, as she bent towards him, "you will take me—won't you?"

He took her quivering hands in his, and held them tight. "God knows I would, if I could," he said earnestly. "But it is impossible, child—utterly impossible. Do you

think I wouldn't be jolly glad to take you if I could?"

"Then you shall," lifting her head with an air of fixed resolution, "if you wish it, and I wish it. I should like to know what there is to prevent it?"

"A whole crowd of things. First, when I get over there, I don't know where I shall put up; they say the hotels are barns with the odour of pig-styes. As to society, it's very queer, the oddest mixture, second and third class English, and a set of impossible Spaniards."

"That wouldn't matter the least bit. You should be all I want in the way of society, and when I couldn't have you, I should sit at home and study a Spanish grammar."

"But there would be no 'home' to sit in, and I should always be away."

"Very well. I would vary the grammar with a novel, and get on splendidly."

He looked down at her eager face, so lovely in its delicacy of feature, purity of colour, and sweetness of expression. "Do you think I'd risk it? I'd as soon wear the

Koh-i-noor as a scarf-pin in the midst of a gang of roughs."

"You would be quite safe. They would take it for a bit of glass."

"Yes, but they couldn't take you for a base imitation. Madge, be brave. I know you've plenty of pluck, little one," coaxingly.

"If I've any pluck, let me show it by coming with you," her lips trembling, her anxious eyes filling with tears.

He shook his head. "You know you are not strong, and it's just the wrong time of year, and I asked Dr. Smith, and he said the heat would be too much for you."

"Then I hate him," with passionate energy. "What does he know about me? I never saw the man in my life. I daresay he thought me a puny invalid, when I'm strong enough for anything."

"But not for San José in the heat of the summer."

"It would only be a taste of cremation before my time, and if it's bad for me, it must be a thousand times worse for you, and you may fall ill, with no one to nurse you.

Oh, Hugh! I couldn't bear it," laying her small brown head on his knee, and bursting into tears, as if this thought were the climax.

He re-assured her as best he could, trying to make her see that she was exaggerating a nuisance into a calamity, pointing out the delight of having her sister with her—showing Vi the country round, and introducing her to the nicest people in the neighbourhood. "All the fellows will be spooning her," he added with a smile. "You will have your work cut out in looking after her. Don't you remember how I tossed up to see which I'd go in for—you or her?"

"No, I don't, because you never did it, and she was too young, quite a child. What a pity that I ever found you lying in a heap outside our gate!" looking at him with a fondness that gave a prompt lie to her words.

"I think I should have found you out later on if you hadn't. There is such a thing as psychological instinct, you know, and it must have led me straight to you."

"Or warned you against me," she said very slowly, as if she were speaking to her-

self more than to her husband. "What a horrid thing it would be to die and think just at the last, when I couldn't help it, or do anything to make it better, that I had done you more harm than good."

"Yes, and it would be very horrid to have the Asiatic cholera, or to wake in the morning with red hair and green eyes."

"You are a wretch to laugh at me."

"I must, when you talk nonsense. How could you by any possibility do me any harm, a child like you?"

"Oh, I don't know," with an impatient movement of her well-shaped head. "How I wish I had as much money as Mr. Grenville. Then you shouldn't be at the orders of a horrid Mr. Whiffin, sent off like a bagman at a moment's notice."

"Or a special correspondent," raising his eyebrows; "that sounds rather nicer! By the by, what have you done with your ten pounds?"

"I think I shall keep it to pay my expenses when I come and fetch you. Hugh, if you don't hurry back, I declare I will."

“On the contrary, perhaps, I shall find you flirting with someone else.”

“Yes, when I have red hair and green eyes,” she assented, with a laugh, though the tears she had shed a few minutes before were still undried on her cheeks. The next moment she started up. “Good gracious, what a memory I have!” she exclaimed, in keenest self-reproach. “I forgot all about that pudding for poor little Ruth.”

“You can send it to-morrow morning ; it will make no difference,” Hugh said carelessly, not guessing that his words were literally true. He had never taken much interest in his wife’s ugly godchild, regarding her as an example of what Nature could make in her most contrary mood. Jessie’s beauty, on the other hand, had attracted him considerably, and he had often thrown her a small coin as he passed by, on purpose to see the delight in her lovely eyes.

The pudding was taken next morning by Anne whilst Captain and Mrs. Manners were both at matins. Mrs. Schonk sent a civil message of thanks to her mistress, but for-

bore to mention that the child for whom it was intended had gone where the desire for puddings no longer exists. The maid being in a hurry to rejoin her young man round the corner, forgot to ask after Ruth, but took it upon herself to say that she thought she must be better, as the woman had said nothing about her being ill. Madge's thoughts were fully engrossed by her husband, for, having decided on taking the journey, he, in Shakespeare's words, stood "not on the order of his going." What with looking over his things, and packing them when carefully prepared, she seemed to have no time or care for anything beyond.

Captain Manners was to start on the Wednesday, and Violet Fitzroy was to arrive on the following Saturday. Madge went about the house with such a woe-begone aspect that the cook began to imagine that Spain was the further side of India, and that "Master" was likely to stay there for the rest of his natural life. But the parlour-maid, whose brain had been exercised by the teaching of a Board School, assured her that

Spain was a country where wild and lawless men called "Carlists" quarrelled with everyone, and would think no more of shooting an English gentleman than a partridge—whereupon they both agreed that "Master," being a sensible gentleman, would turn his back on it as soon as he could.

CHAPTER III.

HE MUST SHARE IN HER SIN.

MRS. SCHONK was not the sort of woman to let the smallest tuft of grass grow under her feet when she had important business on hand. She paid a visit to the undertaker late on Sunday evening, putting it off till that hour in order that he might not be able to gossip about Ruth's death with his neighbours on his way from church. From him she heard that the Rector was going away for a few days, and was to start early on Monday morning. His absence was an immense relief to her mind, for she had been sure that he would ask all kinds of searching questions, which she might find it difficult to answer. Now, Mr. Pulleyne was quite a different sort of priest. He fulfilled his duties with punctuality, regularity, and exacti-

tude, but he was nothing more nor less than an ecclesiastical machine, wound up to perform all the services of the Church with due reverence, to preach concise sermons in very good English on dogmatic points, always to come when he was sent for, and to behave like a priest and a gentleman under all circumstances. He was as reserved as a sentry on duty at the Horse-guards, as prim as any old maid of the past century. It was not in his power to send a passionate thrill of emotion through a congregation, for his influence was only sedative, if he could be said to have any influence at all; and the most emotional of spinsters could never have gushed over a man of such repressive personality. He was the exact antithesis of his Rector, and as such was infinitely better adapted to Mrs. Schonk's purposes. He was told that a child was to be buried at two-thirty on Tuesday afternoon, and punctually at that hour he stood in his white surplice under the old grey porch, his clear-cut features wearing an expression of the deepest reverence, his carefully modulated

voice falling on the silence like a silver bell.

So Ruth Mary Schonk Martin was laid to rest on the warm bosom of the sun-parched earth, and as the heavy sods fell on the small coffin, they seemed to separate her in mercy from the coldness and cruelty of a world in which she had found no niche. Mrs. Schonk, sternly respectable in her widow's weeds, represented a train of absent mourners, and flourished a white handkerchief in her black-gloved hand. It was with an effort that she could subdue the satisfaction she felt at having completed her work so successfully. All was going well. Mr. Orlando Smith had called on the Monday, and promised to write all necessary particulars to his employers, who would forward the money in two days. On Wednesday she expected visits from two other collectors. All these men were so obliging that they never asked awkward questions, or made a fuss about the absence of a register's stamp on the death-certificate. If ever a doubt as to the effect of his operations crossed the mind of Orlando

Smith, when he was suffering from toothache, or an attack on the liver, he always quieted his conscience by shifting the whole responsibility of his actions on to the shoulders of his employers. The company engaged him to collect names and pennies, and if he did so with indefatigable zeal, he was merely doing his duty according to his lights. "His not to reason why." It is impossible to carry on Tennyson's lines any further, for it is the children who die on account of his "doing," and not the active little collector with his Irish manner and his cheerful ways. He goes on his road rejoicing, and in consequence Mrs. Schonk is standing by an open grave with a look of absolute triumph on her handsome face. The last blessing has been said; Mr. Pulleyne, followed by the clerk, has returned to the vestry; Mrs. Schonk is just going, when Jessie, who has been wonderfully quiet during the service, bends her golden head over the yawning hole, and says confidentially, as if her flute-like treble were sure to reach her lost friend, "I wouldn't 'tay, 'Uth. Nasty black box—not comfy at all."

"Come away, child," Mrs. Schonk said sharply. "Mustn't talk nonsense in a churchyard."

"But I 'ant her so," a big tear running down her rosy cheek, as so early in her short life she felt the longing which has wrung the hearts of thousands through countless centuries of sorrow. "Can't play all alone."

"Then you shall work for a change. I'm alone, and I don't want anyone with me," walking on with her head in the air, and her heart—a useful machine, with no room for the finer sensibilities—swelling with the consciousness of her own independence.

The sense of satisfaction went home with her, and stayed by her till, at half-past eight that evening, there came a soft knock at the door—a knock which told her that Mrs. Manners was outside. For the first time she felt uncomfortable, and her guilty eyes shunned the innocent ones which tried to look into them as if to fathom their ungodly secret.

"Dead! you can't mean it?" exclaimed Madge, in her first surprise. "Let me see her at once, poor little thing."

“Can’t, mum. The death was sudden at the last, and she was buried very respectably this afternoon by the Rev. Pulleyne.”

“Buried ! Impossible ! Why, how long ago was it that I was here, and she was alive then, and not so very ill ? Oh, why *didn’t* you send for me ? ” leaning against the doorway, as if the sudden news had deprived her of her strength.

“There was no time to send for anyone but the doctor,” sullenly. “She went into a faint as soon as I had put them vi’lets in her hand.”

“Then she had no pain ? I am thankful for that,” in a low voice, as she wiped away her tears.

A curious look came over Mrs. Schonk’s face. No pain ? A ghastly remembrance of the small emaciated body, covered with marks of her cruel usage, shot across the retina of her mind, and for a moment stopped her glib tongue.

“I suppose you never thought of sending for one of the clergy to say a prayer over her ? ”

"You are right there. It didn't so much as cross my mind," with a quick return to her usual state of defiance. "Now, there's some sense in sending for a doctor, so I did it."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He gave it some Latin name—'marasmus,' I think—but it was just consumption. She was marked for death from the first. But here's the certificate if you would like to satisfy yourself." She pulled it out of her pocket, where she had put it earlier in the day in order to show it to the curate if he should ask for it.

Madge looked at it with her tear-dimmed eyes, and handed it back without a word.

"What is marasmus, Hugh?" she asked, as she walked home with her husband down the now silent road.

"Wasting away, I fancy. A convenient term which the doctors use when a child has been starved to death," he said slowly. "You see when there is no proof where's the use of making a fuss?"

"But it ought to be proved," she cried,

with passionate indignation, her deepest feelings stirred into action. "If I thought for a moment that Mrs. Schonk had starved little Ruth, do you think I would rest an instant before I hunted the wretch to death? Oh, Hugh, you don't think it really?" clasping her hands round his arm, and looking up into his grave face with earnest eyes.

"No, no; I know nothing about it," hastily, for he had no wish to leave his wife with such a nightmare on the brain.

"Why didn't you say something about her being buried so awfully quickly?" she asked regretfully.

"Because I did not want to put the woman on her guard. Remember there is that other jolly little girl with the yellow hair. If you offend this virago, you will lose your chance of keeping an eye on her."

"No one could have the heart to injure that lovely child," Madge said, with a sigh, as she thought of little "monkey-face," who could have had no beauty even in a mother's eye.

"In the absence of a heart, the child runs

a risk," he said thoughtfully. "But anyhow, you must tell the Rector, and see what he says." And then he changed the subject, anxious to talk of many other things on this their last evening together.

As soon as she had got rid of the Manners, Mrs. Schonk put on her bonnet, and started for Dr. Ford's. The White House stood by itself, surrounded by its own garden, with clumps of evergreens growing close to the lower windows, and hiding them from the speculating gaze of passers-by. With the overhanging branches of the trees, and the overgrown evergreens crowding close up to its walls, the house had a melancholy aspect, like a plant on which the sun has never shone. Grass was growing in the paths, and in the crevices of the doorstep, whilst the roses which had the courage to bloom in the shade stretched long branches out on every side, as if struggling after a fuller measure of light. The door was ajar, so Mrs. Schonk pushed it open, and walked in without ceremony.

She found Dr. Ford in the dining-room,

sitting by the round table, on which the remains of his dinner were still left. He was smoking a cherry-wood pipe, with a glass of brandy and water by his side ; and, to judge by his face, his reflections had not been of too pleasant a description. He gave her a sullen look, without one word of greeting ; but taking no notice of his discourteous manner, to which she was by this time completely accustomed, she closed the door behind her, and sat down on the nearest chair. There was a heavy silence, broken only by the song of a missel-thrush outside in the uncared-for garden. It reminded Dr. Ford of a time long gone by, when he was a happy, reckless schoolboy, waiting at a stile for the girl who happened to be his ideal at the moment. The contrast between that frank, light-hearted girl, and the stern, secretive woman opposite to him, struck him like a jarring discord. She was more hateful to him than ever at that instant, because she seemed to stand with the solidity of an Egyptian pyramid between all that innocent pleasure in the past, and all possibility of

happiness in the future. He told himself angrily that she was his bane. If it had not been for her, he could have enjoyed life like other men, and played his part with the best of them, for he was as ready as any second-rate Adam to put the blame of his own weakness on the woman's sturdier back; and the thrush sang on as if to taunt him with all that he had lost, and all that he was losing, and all the years of his wasted manhood seemed to rise up against him. A fierce light came into his eyes, and he broke out roughly :

"What devil's work are you after to-night?"

"A nice, civil greeting, doctor," Mrs. Schonk answered with a sarcastic smile, "but I know how to take a joke. I wanted just to thank you for all your kind attention to little Ruth. You couldn't stop the disease, but I can answer for it you did your best."

"What the deuce do you mean?" pulling his pipe out of his mouth, and staring at her in his perplexity.

"You understand fast enough," she said

contemptuously ; “ you call it by a foreign word, but it was consumption sure enough. And mind this, you’ve attended her for the last six weeks, and you can tell the Rector so if he comes sneaking round to pester you with questions.”

“ I can tell the parson something else,” he said savagely, “ that you’ve driven that miserable child out of the world by starvation and cruelty, as sure as I sit here.”

“ And the first thing he will say to you, will Mr. Lindsay, for I know he’s a downright man, with no humbug about him, he’ll say, as sure as your name’s Patrick Ford— ‘ What did you mean then by writing that certificate? I’ll show you up for the dirtiest scoundrel in the county,’ and I’d like to see how you’d ever hold up your head again !” She stood up as she spoke, her eyes glittering, her cheeks white as death, and he leant back in his chair, knowing to his cost that what she said was nothing but the bitter truth. “ And so, Master Patrick,” her voice changing into a more wheedling tone, “ you’ll please to remember that you attended regular, and

gave medicine, but that nothing could save the child. And now, having said what I've come to say, I'll take myself off. Good evening to you. I know you won't forget."

"Curse you!" he cried, exasperated to the last degree, "I'd give half I possess to know there was a hell, in the hope that you might frizzle in it."

"Thank you, sir. A very nice Christian sentiment! Ah, but I forgot, you believe in nothing no more than me, so I mustn't expect anything else." She gave a laugh, a cold, scornful laugh, in which there was not a single note of joy, and left him to his meditations. When the woman took his infidelity for granted, the advantages of Faith became suddenly apparent to his disgusted mind. What wouldn't he have given to be able to go to a priest, to tell him the whole story of his misdoing, that first horrid step downward, which had led to one after the other in a miserable succession, till each sin hung round his neck like a chain of intolerable weight? Oh to have the burden lifted, and go away absolved, to wash in the Christian's Pool of

Siloam, have every stain cleansed, and start afresh, with new hope, new strength, new energy! He had been laughed out of his Faith by a band of wild medical students at St. Ignatius' Hospital, who, in the pride of their own narrow intellects, judged the broadest questions of life according to their own limited standards; and as he had begun then, he thought bitterly he must go on. As he had given up he could not recover what he had willingly renounced. He had thrown a jewel into the waves of the Atlantic, and there it must lie till the world returned to the chaos from which it sprang. The missel-thrush flew to another garden, the silence of the night fell on the song of birds and the hum of insects, the shadows gathered darkly in the room where Patrick Ford sat, yielding inch by inch to his despair, instead of standing up like a man and fighting, as for dear life, against it.

There was no way out of it, he said to himself again and again. That woman dominated his life. As he had lied by implication on that certificate, so he must lie

again about his attendance, and all the circumstances of the case. He must share in her sin, because seven years ago she had sheltered his. It was as clear as the clearest mathematical proposition, and so it might go on till the end of time, dragging him down each year to a lower depth of degradation, till death brought it all to a full stop. It was a cheering prospect for a man in the prime of life, who had started, not so many years ago, with the determination to make a name, and never to stop till he had reached the topmost height of his profession. He had dreamt his dreams with the most sanguine, and now he was enjoying his crude realities alone with his despairing self. The result was another glass of brandy.

CHAPTER IV.

“SAFE AS A CHURCH.”

HUGH was gone ! To Madge his departure for Spain seemed the most terrible thing that had ever happened, so she took the opportunity of weeping copiously, and without restraint. The whole morning she enjoyed herself in this fashion, to the edification of Anne, who, catching furtive glimpses of her red-eyed mistress, handkerchief in hand, remarked to Elizabeth, the cook, that the mistress was a wife who did credit to the whole establishment, and gave it an air of *bon ton*. Eva Grenville wisely waited till the afternoon, in order that the first edge of her friend's grief might be worn off. Then she drove up in her dashing little cart, and carried Madge off to the Park. She was amused by her dejection, and wholly unsym-

pathetic. "If I were married," she said frankly, "I should be thankful to my husband for leaving me alone for a time, and wouldn't I amuse myself whilst he was away!"

"Not if you cared for him the least little bit in the world," the wife of a year and a half replied out of her deep experience.

Frank Wood was wise enough in his generation to adapt himself to another person's point of view. Seeing that Mrs. Manners believed herself to be broken-hearted on account of her husband's absence, he affected a tone of the deepest sympathy, and wanted to know every why and wherefore of the case. Why had he gone? What good would he do by going? Couldn't some other fellow have gone instead? There was such an amount of tender interest in his blue eyes as he asked these questions that Madge was quite touched, and out of the fulness of her heart gave him her complete confidence. As she had forgotten to order her cart to be sent for her, he proposed that she should walk home, and that he should escort her. Frank's pulse quickened at the pleasant prospect of a

walk together in the moonlight ; but Madge only thought of sparing trouble to the Grenvilles' coachman, and never noticed the mischievous twinkle in Eva's eyes, as she bade her good-night, and expressed a hope that she would arrive safely.

The moonlight lay softly on the young fronds of the ferns and the grassy slopes, the shadows gave a dark mysterious charm to the narrow path under drooping branches ; whilst the silence, deep and solemn, seemed to cast a spell on Frank's exuberant spirits, and bring into prominence the more refined instincts of his spontaneous nature. In the midst of his admiration he felt a high reverence for the young wife who, out of her great love for the absent man, poured out her confidences in such a simple, winning way to the one who was fortunate enough to be present. Listening to her soft voice, and within sight of the pure pale face, which seemed the sweetest in the world to him at the moment, all his busy, practical self dropped from him, and he felt as if he had changed his identity, and at the same time entered into another

world of thought and feeling. Madge was of such a different type to the girls he was accustomed fraternising with in the Row, or in a ball-room, that even when she charmed him most, he was conscious that there was an intangible something in the ways of thought to which he failed to rise, and which made him feel a more ordinary mortal than usual. When they parted at the door of the Priory, there was no lingering hand-shake, no futile pretty speech. His glib tongue seemed to have lost its usual powers. "Good-night, Mrs. Manners, I'm sure—" and there he stopped, in the act of speaking, forgetting what he was going to say.

Madge smiled, and thanked him graciously for his escort; and then turned quickly in at the opened door, absorbed in the thought of her empty home. Oh, how horrid it was to have no one to say to her those cheery little common-places which make all the difference in a home-coming, and soften the edges of family life—to have nobody but sleepy Anne to hand her a bedroom candle-stick—nobody to ask if she had enjoyed herself. She took

herself to bed in a subdued frame of mind, and got up the next morning with an air of dejection, looking about as lively as a pet-dog who knows that he is in disgrace with his master. By Friday, however, she began to feel a little better, and the prospect of her sister's arrival helped to cheer her up. When she returned from even-song, she found Mr. Frank Wood waiting for her. He asked after her health in an eager manner, as if she had been seriously ill ; and seemed delighted when she told him that she was quite well, as if he had been suffering much anxiety on her account.

Sitting down by the wide-open French window, she took up her knitting, in which she was deeply interested, as it was to develop into a pair of silk socks for her husband. Frank subsided on to the stone step, from which position he could study her at his leisure ; but he was his own practical self to-day, and had something more business-like in his mind than mere admiration. He had come there with an object, and Madge, with the quick perception of a

woman, was perfectly conscious of this as she sat opposite to him, her eyes fixed on her fast-moving needles, her ears waiting for his piece of news, whilst a slight smile lingered about her lips.

"I came to you straight from the city, and am awfully ashamed of my dusty coat," looking down at a speck on his sleeve as he spoke, and flicking it away with his finger. "I'm going to be quite too fearfully bold, but I know you will forgive me."

"You frighten me," looking perfectly composed ; "but pray go on."

He flushed to the roots of his fair hair, but looked straight up into her face notwithstanding.

"You were so good to me the other night ; you really talked to me as if you trusted me."

"Put it down to the moon ; it is said to have a curious effect on some people," with a mischievous twinkle under her long lashes.

"Not I ; you are not a bit of a humbug, Mrs. Manners. I always know exactly what you feel and think," he said audaciously.

"You think you do, and that does quite as well," she said quietly, as she went on with her husband's sock, perfectly unruffled by what might have seemed like attempts at flirtation.

"But I do," feeling desperately aggrieved. "I think I ought to, after having studied you for nearly two years."

"You don't live down here, Mr. Wood, and even when you came for a flying visit, I suppose you occasionally thought of something else. Please give me my silk."

He got up quickly, and picked up the ball, which had rolled out of the window on to the gravel path. He wound the silk carefully before returning it to her, and as he dropped the ball into her slender fingers, picked up the thread of the conversation.

"Other people have had my casual thoughts, certainly, but—"

"You talk as if your thoughts went out for one night's lodging at a time," she interrupted him with her low, sweet laugh. "They can't be worth so very much after all."

"I thought of you to-day, at any rate, to

some purpose," somewhat nettled and driven into business in a hurry.

"The purpose that brought you here?"

"Yes, but how did you know? I haven't said a word about it to a soul. Do you care to make a little money, Mrs. Manners?"

"Don't I? I'm absolutely longing for it." Her knitting went down into her lap, her large eyes fixed themselves in an embarrassing way on his face, her thoughts flew far away to Hugh, separated from her now by leagues of land and sea. Hadn't he told her that if only they weren't such paupers Whiffin would be sure to take him into partnership, and then he would send someone else off on these troublesome journeys, whilst he stayed with his wife at home?

Frank resumed his seat, and began to unfold his plans with alacrity. He had heard of something which was "safe as a church," the risk merely nominal, half the men he knew would give their eyes to have a tip, but they were keeping it as dark as they could.

"Only a small sum is necessary to-day, but

to-morrow, the shares are certain to go up with a bound. There isn't a moment to be lost. Give me fifty pounds and I'll treble it. What am I saying? quadruple it at least, in less than no time."

"Fifty pounds!" Madge's face fell; "you might just as well ask me for a thousand."

"But surely you have that amount at your disposal?" he began incredulously.

"No, nor ever had. When my dear old dad sent me twenty pounds yesterday, as a birthday present, I felt the richest girl in England."

He gave a short laugh, for it seemed so ridiculous to him, but the next moment he was perfectly grave.

"I suppose you spent your ten pounds the next day?" he said slowly.

"No, I was waiting to go to town."

"Thirty pounds would be better than nothing."

"Oh, but I was saving the 'ten' for a present for Hugh. I couldn't use that."

"You could give him a much better present with a hundred and twenty."

"A hundred and twenty," breathlessly, as

if it were a matter of millions. "If there were the least chance—"

"Every chance, scarcely a doubt."

"But, Mr. Wood," her eyes dilating, the softest tinge of pink coming and going in her cheeks.

He looked at her with intense admiration in his eyes. How lovely she was, and how different to any woman he had ever seen before!

"Try me once again," he said with a depth of eagerness in his voice, as he leant forward. He felt as if everything on earth depended on her consent, and it gave an unusual force to his will. She was carried away by it, as she had been once before, and after a few minutes of hesitation, shortened by energetic protestations, she went upstairs to fetch her treasured store. As he opened the door for her, the Malmaison carnation, which had given a tone of colour to her grey dress, fell at his feet. He picked it up, and looked at it doubtfully. His first impulse was to place it in his button-hole, with the intention of pointing to it triumphantly as soon as she returned; his second to hide it in his inner

pocket, and carry it away with him in secret satisfaction ; his third to lay it on the table like a discreet old man, instead of a hot-headed youngster. She fascinated him more entirely than any girl he had ever met before. In his facile flirtations he had often offered his adoration to a fair creature whom he had known but for half an hour, and admired only *pro tem*. But with Mrs. Manners he had told himself from the first that discretion must not only be the better part of valour, but the whole of it. Their friendship was to be a friendship *de facto*, and not a respectable mask hung on to the blushing face of love. If this were a commonplace flirtation, the proper place for the carnation was in his button-hole ; if he were a lover, in his coat pocket ; if an honest-minded friend, on the table, and on to the table it went. He had acted according to his intuitions, he had done his duty like a man, and yet contradictiously, he felt like a fool, a strait-laced fool, when he was hurrying up to the Park, too late for dinner, too late in the most palpable and outrageous fashion, with the thirty pounds in

his pocket, and Madge's last smile imprinted on his remembrance.

Chance put a vase of carnations opposite to him at the dinner-table. Eva was watching him curiously as he fixed his eyes upon them. Presently she said with a smile, "Why are you staring at those carnations? Don't you like them?"

"Yes, awfully. They are just like one I saw this afternoon," he said carelessly.

But this unnecessary admission was just what his cousin had been waiting for. She leant forward with laughing triumph in her eyes.

"Now I know why you were so late for dinner," she said significantly. "I thought the train could not be an hour and a half behind its time."

"I never said it was," getting furiously red, and furiously angry with himself for doing so.

"You never said it wasn't, and you let the company be blamed for nothing."

"All right. They don't get a lot that they deserve. When I'm head boss—"

"You'll time the train so as to allow two hours at the Priory *en route* for dinner."

"Don't know what you mean," avoiding her eyes. "Who mentioned the Priory?"

"Not you, my dear boy, so don't fuss yourself. I happen to know that no one but my father grows those carnations about here, and that he gave one to somebody — whom we won't mention — this very morning."

"Let him give them to every woman in Letherleigh. It's nothing to do with me," pulling his moustaches ferociously, and looking round the table as amiably as a dog who is ready to bite.

"I am thankful to think that a sister arrives to-morrow," shaking her head with great gravity.

He looked up quickly.

"A sister? Can't she take care of herself without that?"

"I don't think she can, if *you* find it necessary to help her."

"I only wish I could," gloomily, in the vain hope that he might disarm his cousin by

a matter-of-fact frankness. "Shame of that fellow to go off and desert her!"

"Not at all," said Eva decidedly, for she had a fine idea of justice when her own feelings did not get in the way. "Captain Manners is one of the very best sort, and I could stake my head that he was ten times sorrier to go than she was to be left."

Mr. Frank Wood gave an inaudible whistle.

"'Pon my word, Eva, you have the crankiest notions that I ever came across," he began, in a state of subdued exasperation. "You pity a man who goes off on a lark—call it business if you like, but, at all events, he is sure to get some fun out of it—and you haven't a scrap of compassion for a poor girl left all alone."

"Alone with a crowd of friends!" scornfully.

"Put them all into one end of the scales, and her husband would overbalance them out and out."

"Have you asked her?"

He gave her a look which ought to have

withered her, but fortunately for the chances of peace, Mr. Grenville broke into the conversation with a question about some intricate matter connected with the City, and the Manners were not mentioned again.

As Madge looked out at the stars that night, she had forgotten Mr. Frank Wood and her first effort at speculation; the remembrance of her absent husband was also shunted on one side to give place to a dead child. This day last week Ruth was alive, looking out on the unkind world with her large pathetic eyes, asking so plainly for the love, the sympathy, the happiness, which came to other children in fullest measure, but were dealt out to her by Fate with the pinching hand of a miser. Did she know why so much had been denied her on earth? Did she understand the old-world lesson of purification by suffering? Did she feel in the all-sufficing love of the Father that she was no longer a lonely deserted child?

CHAPTER V.

“WHAT IS TO BE DONE ?”

THE Rector was greatly disturbed by the news of Ruth's sudden death, and the precipitate haste with which she had been buried. Mr. Pulleyne could only tell him that, having received due notice of a funeral, he had read the service punctually at the appointed hour. He did not know that there was anything suspicious about the circumstances of the case, and therefore had raised no difficulties, and made no inquiries. He was as passive and unemotional as a cow, and his quiescence was peculiarly irritating to his Rector. Mr. Lindsay hurried to the police-station, and suggested to an imperturbable inspector that something must be done. The inspector assured him of his willingness, but confessed that he did not

see his way to taking any steps in the absence of all evidence. The Rector argued, represented, and expostulated, but without any satisfactory result; so in the cool of the evening, his purpose not having cooled with the atmosphere, he betook himself to Mr. Templeton.

The barrister gave him some iced claret, and a comfortable chair under the verandah; and after these small attentions to his physical comfort, bestowed upon him the whole attention of his intellectual mind.

“From what you say I have no doubt that the child was done to death by the woman Schonk,” he said slowly, after listening to the Rector’s narrative.

“Murdered! call it by its proper name.”

“Well, murdered if you like, but there’s nothing to be done.”

“There must, and there shall be,” energetically, in spite of his long walk. “I couldn’t rest in my bed.”

“But how could there be? You tell me that the parish doctor has certified to a death by natural causes, and declared that he has

been in regular attendance. That a visitor, on the other hand, had noticed the emaciated appearance of the child, expressed her belief that she had not long to live, and owned to a feeling that there was something wrong, that the other child, a mere baby, has been known to cry because Ruth Martin was beaten, or shut up in the coal-hole. But what is this worth as evidence?”

“Surely it would prove cruelty, and at least culpable carelessness, on the part of the woman?”

“The woman could, and would deny any cruelty or neglect on her side; and who could contradict her? She would aver that the parents were heartless, cold-blooded people, who had virtually deserted their little one, and left her on the hands of a poor woman who had not the means to keep a child in any comfort. Then there would be the doctor’s evidence, impossible to gainsay.”

“But he is a drunkard, and a shameless liar.”

“Well, that has nothing to do with the case. No, you have no evidence; you ought

to have, but you haven't a scrap to go upon."

"But if this child has been drugged, slowly poisoned in fact, surely we could get an order to exhume?"

"You would have to show cause, and uncommonly good cause too, for such an order. If actual poison has been used by the woman she might be detected, and possibly hanged. But do you imagine she was such a fool? At most, she would give her an over-dose of some so-called cordial, at regular intervals, and that with over-work, exposure to cold, and unwholesome food, even without cruel treatment, would be quite enough to kill a child, and kill it quickly, without leaving any signs to betray her after the most careful *post-mortem* analysis."

The Rector sighed heavily. "It's monstrous, positively incredible. This woman turns her house into an establishment for private murder, and you actually mean to say that we can do nothing to prevent it?" staring at the barrister, as if he were hoping for a contradiction. But none came.

"The fault is in the law," he said slowly, "any woman with the smallest amount of foresight can evade it."

"Then it must be altered," decisively, as if he had the whole power of the Bench behind him; "and how are we to manage it?"

"Rouse public opinion, get clever men to speak about it, and to write to the papers. Have the question well ventilated, and then, when the popular mind is ripe for it, get some rising man to bring it forward in the House. That is the only way to do it, and if this is not done, children will go on dying through neglect, cold, starvation, or even secret poisoning, until the end of the chapter," Mr. Templeton said with conviction.

"Not in Letherleigh. I give you my word," Mr. Lindsay said emphatically, "if that woman Schonk dares to meddle with that other child's health, she shall find herself in the wrong box, and that box shall be a gaol."

"You will find it uncommonly difficult to get her there," Templeton said with a smile.

"Difficult or not, I will manage it, so help me, God," he added reverently, as he

stood up. "Good-night ; you've helped me tremendously, and given me an object."

"I thought you had too many already."

"Better than too few," he said cheerfully, with an eager look in his eyes, as if he were all ready for the fight.

"But I say, Lindsay, how does this sort of thing square with your idea of an all-protecting Providence?" the barrister asked quietly.

The Rector stopped, and looked full at the questioner for a moment before replying. "My dear Templeton," he said at last, "this is scarcely the time to discuss such a vast question. Some other day, when I am less excited, I shall be delighted to talk it over with you. Only let me point out one thing ; you speak as if this woman's abominable cruelty and an over-ruling Providence had some connection with each other."

"On the contrary," replied the barrister briskly ; "I only suggested that this cruel monster of a woman seemed able to set aside the power of Providence with impunity."

"No, I assure you," Mr. Lindsay said

warmly, “she could in no way put aside the providential care of God for that little child, nor will she escape her full punishment for her wilful breaking of His divine laws. It seems to me that you allow God’s providential care, but ignore His gift to us of free-will. God’s dealings with man from the first have been free from coercion. He never forced men to obedience ; they have refused it, and they refuse it still ; but He made a law of retribution. ‘Be sure your sins will find you out ;’ they always did, always do, and they always will. The power of benevolence, of love, of self-sacrifice, of doing to others what we would they should do unto us, *i.e.*, the faculty of expressing God’s love for us, by loving one’s neighbour as oneself, is dependent on the gift of free-will. Man must be *free* to serve God, if his service is to be of any value.” Mr. Templeton nodded acquiescence, as he lighted a second cigar, and pushed his case across the table. The Rector shook his head, and went on. “Otherwise he would only be a machine, worked by some power from God, and therefore capable of express-

ing, not man's love for God, but only God's love for Himself."

"Then you actually maintain that all the misery and cruelty in the world implies no failure of God's providence?" Templeton said slowly, as if only half convinced.

"Certainly. It implies nothing but man's wilful misuse of his own god-like power of free-will and free action, the power which enables him to say 'I will,' and 'I won't.' This woman has committed a crime at which we are both horror-stricken. I gather from it that she has wilfully refused the guidance of God; she has chosen to be cruel for her own personal ends. God has not forgotten to be kind, as that poor lamb has realised by this, nor has He forgotten to punish, as this woman shall realise before long."

"Still there is a screw loose somewhere, or this thing never would have happened," the barrister persisted with a shake of his head, which meant that he was not quite satisfied.

"Of course the loose screw is in the law, which has utterly failed to protect the children

of the land; and that failure will bring its own punishment. But I deny that the providential care of God is in fault; and I don't think you can logically hold such an opinion. It's an easy thing to say, but it is just as easily met."

"I see that free-will lies at the root of the whole matter. What a heap of trouble would be saved if we were just automatons, and nothing more," he said with a sigh, as if he were longing to surrender his energies and turn into a steam-worked machine at a moment's notice.

"Yes, and you would like to feel when you were making one of your capital speeches in court, that the fellow on the other side could have done it just as well if he had been wound up by the same key?"

"No, by Jove! leave me my intellect, if you take all the rest."

"An intellect worked to order, not much of a thing to boast of! Well, good-night for the second time. My wife will think that I'm lost."

The Rector went off in a hurry, dismayed

to find that their talk had lasted till midnight. But as he walked along the quiet lanes he thought of the future with new hope. After all, the subject which was uppermost in his mind was one which was certain to rouse the sympathies of all classes, without exception. It was only necessary to get it mooted in Parliament, and Godfrey Fane was the man to do it. It must be delicately insinuated to Sir Adrian that it was time to retire.

CHAPTER VI.

VIOLET FITZROY MAKES HER DÉBUT.

“AND now, Vi, I’m going to take you to the Park to show you off,” Madge remarked on the following Monday, regarding her sister with a fond, but critical eye.

Violet Fitzroy was a fair likeness of her elder sister, but the expression of her face was so entirely different, that to close observers there was a greater dissimilarity between them than seemed to be properly accounted for by their features. Perhaps it was the nose that did it, for that was impudently *retroussé*, instead of severely straight; or the lips, which were so prone to smile that a school-boy cousin who had no reverence for anything, not even for an Archbishop in his robes, or a Lord Chancellor in his wig, declared that she was “always on the grin.”

Her brightness was so contagious, that the dullest felt as if they were removed into a more exhilarating atmosphere when she was near. Her common-sense was so evident that many people appealed to her for advice, with a momentary intention of following it ; and her capacity for decision was so full of exceeding comfort to the weak-minded who needed a tonic for their failing resolution, that they gathered round her in her Devonshire home like limpets clinging to a rock, until the Rector remarked with a protesting sigh, "One would think that the Rectory was nothing more nor less than an asylum for idiots."

Looking like two Shirley poppies in their pink cambrics, the sisters pursued their way to the Grenvilles. Jessie lifted up her rosebud face over the edge of the gate, as they passed by Rose Cottage, and gave a shout of delight when she saw Ruth's "own lady."

"Mummy been here," she cried, as if every one must share in the joyous piece of news.

"I'm so glad. I should like to have seen her and told her all about you," Madge said

kindly as she stooped to kiss the child's flushed face.

"Nothin' to tell. Me velly dood," Jess answered out of her own experience, for she thought that there was never anything to tell except "tales" to someone's disadvantage; and then she climbed a little higher, for she wanted to stroke the bracelet on Madge's arm, which had excited her admiration on the day of Ruth's christening.

"Did your mother drop this?" she asked as she picked up an envelope which was lying in the dust at Violet's feet. It was addressed in a masculine hand to—

MISS DOUGLAS,
Edenbridge Castle,
Nr. Seven Oaks,
Kent.

"Mummy 'ould like you to keep it. Mummy loves ev'rybody that loves me," Jess said confidently.

"You dear child; did you tell her that I loved you?" Madge asked tenderly.

"A 'ickly bit,' not so much as 'Uth.

Mummy says 'Uth not in b'ack box now. Horrid b'ack box," shaking her golden head vehemently. "Never let anybody put me in there, case the angels might fordet me, and I should be so frightened in the dark."

"God will never forget you, remember that, darling, even if the angels did."

The child looked up with a confident nod.

"Mummy 'on't. Me stay here with mummy, 'Uth go up there 'cos she hadn't a mummy at all."

"Oh, how could a mother give up a child like that?" Violet exclaimed in astonishment, as they went on their way under the welcome shadow of some trees by the roadside. "I should be afraid to let her out of my sight lest somebody should steal her."

"I should think it was a case of sad necessity. Mrs. Schonk will never tell me a word about her, except that her mother is a real lady, every inch of her."

"Keep that envelope, it may be very useful."

"My dear Vi, how could it? I only brought it as far as this to please the child."

"If this Mrs. Schonk is the nice sort of person you think her, you may want a clue to the mother.

"Possibly, but I don't see how this could help."

"Don't you? Oh, Madge, I never knew anyone like you? Keep it, at any rate; that can do no harm to anybody; you haven't the makings of a detective in you."

"No, I'm thankful to say I haven't," looking over her shoulder with laughing disdain, as she unfastened the private gate into the Park.

Dr. Ford passed at the moment in his high-wheeled cart, looking unusually spruce and alert. He raised his hat to Mrs. Manners, with whom he had made an involuntary acquaintance in the houses of some of the cottagers, and he flashed such a vivid glance at Violet that she drew back indignantly.

"Be quick," whispered Madge, and hurrying her sister through the gate, she locked it hastily on the inside with the key that Mr. Grenville had given her as a mark of special

favour. "I don't know what possessed me," she added with a laugh," but I thought he was going to stop."

"If he had stopped we should certainly have gone on," Violet said coolly. "But oh what a lovely place! Trees a century old. So the family, by a natural course of contradiction, must have grown up like a mushroom in one night."

"Well, if they are new they can't be worn out. Mr. Grenville is an old dear, and Eva quite too delightful."

"Don't praise her overmuch, or I shall hate her."

"You couldn't hate her if you would," Madge said confidently. "She is so very good to look at that she takes you by storm."

"Then I shall put myself on the defensive at once," she rejoined with cheerful perversity.

"I am not a man, so I need not give in to a pretty nose or a well-turned lip, and beauty won't paralyse my reasoning faculties."

"As if reason had anything to do with it," Madge exclaimed in fine scorn. Being a creature of impulse herself, she could not

conceive the possibility of anything but a spontaneous liking. She had seen Hugh Manners lying on a bank of ferns, and she was convinced that she had loved him on the spot. It was not true, for if his friends had arrived before her father, and carried him off to the inn, she would have found that her own transitory glimpse of him had made no impression on her heart or fancy. But many lovers like to delight themselves with this sort of illusion, and as it does no harm to anybody, not even to themselves, no one cares to energise overmuch about dispelling it.

Eva Grenville was sitting under the large cedar in a wonderful garment of so-called "daring mixtures," strongly recommended by her dressmaker, who had ordered the component parts from Paris, and found that no one else had the courage to take them off her hands, and equally objected to by her father, who had a rooted aversion for any kind of audacity either in feminine dress or feminine manners. It was outrageous, but the vivid tints set off her beauty in an odd sort of way,

and what might have seemed vulgar on any other girl was only "out of the common" on Eva Grenville, and gave a touch of picturesque colour to the dark shadows under the branches of the cedar. She was pursuing a desultory conversation with Godfrey Fane, who had ridden over from the Chase because Sir Adrian's caustic humour had been too much for his philosophy. Having been bullied at home, he was ready for any amount of petting abroad, and he wondered vaguely whether he wanted it most from Miss Grenville, or from the wife of Hugh Manners. It was so easy to get it from the one, if she happened to be in the right mood, so difficult to get it from the other, whatever might be her mood of the moment. So difficult to get it! The very reason why he should try for it. Even to the laziest, difficulty in obtaining gives a charm to the object in view, though perhaps not an incentive to much effort in gaining it. Not that he either wished or intended to carry on a decided flirtation with Mrs. Manners. His experiences in Vienna, as well as his friendship for Madge's husband, forbade a re-

currence to his former nefarious practices ; but it nettled him to find that whilst he was regarding her as an interesting psychological study, she had so little interest in him that she actually preferred to talk to an inexperienced boy like Frank Wood, or a much experienced middle-aged man like Josiah Grenville, rather than to Godfrey Fane, late diplomat and society favourite, the man whom women had always liked, and sometimes liked too well ! When the sisters arrived he offered his own chair, with sublime but unnecessary self-abnegation, for there were several other seats of which they could take their choice ; and he devoted himself to the younger because he was conscious of a wish to talk to the elder, snubbing his own self in the same way that he would have snubbed any other man who had annoyed him. Madge was delighted to see her sister getting on so well with Hugh's great friend, and had not the smallest pang of jealousy.

“ My sister maintains that reason has nothing to do with the affections, Mr. Fane,” Violet remarked, for the conversation had

somehow drifted to the same topic as they had discussed on their way through the Park.

"Hard on Hugh, but satisfactory to the rest of the world," he said quietly.

"I don't see how it could be either," and Madge flushed resentfully. "If a woman stopped to reason, she would never fall in love."

"No, but she might walk into it, which would be cheaper in the end."

"How cheaper?" exclaimed Eva, raising her eye-brows. "What a horrid idea!"

"Yes, if you will persist in viewing everything from an £ s. d. point of view," some irritation in his voice. "When I talk of cheap, I don't mean getting a thing for sixpence which generally costs a bob."

"Oh, don't you? Then please explain."

"Mr. Fane means, I think," said Madge softly, "that if you walk into it slowly, with your eyes wide open, you are saved from all chance of disillusion afterwards."

"You've time to catch sight of the danger

signal, and turn on the break if you like."

"If the break were turned on too often there would be no matrimony at all, and I am sure the army of spinsters is large enough already," objected Eva.

"Don't distress yourself. The insane thirst for over-cramming will soon thin their ranks."

"I thought that you were the last to allow that men would wish to marry small epitomes of knowledge," and Eva looked at him in surprise.

"They won't be able to, for the small epitomes, as you call them, will have dwindled into their graves. If they over-fortify their poor little brains, their physical strength will decline in proportion. See what Sir J. C. B. says!"

Then Violet fell upon him, and tried metaphorically to reduce him to mince-meat. In triumph she flung at him the name of a learned professor who had studied the candidates at the London University, and declared them to be weak-eyed and narrow-chested,

with stooping shoulders, and an appearance of general debility.

"If knowledge is too much for us, it is also too much for you," she said with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, "and I suppose we ought to make up our minds to be healthy, over-fed dunces. How lively the world would be!"

"It would be the saving of the people who come after. The brain-power of the world is tried to the uttermost, and if we are going on at the pace we have started at, the madhouses will be fuller than the gaols."

"You dreadfully depressing man!" exclaimed Eva in disgust, as she jumped up, looking the incarnation of health and vitality. "We must have a game of tennis to restore the mental and physical balance."

"Would you really like a woman who never opened a book?" Madge asked as she picked up a racquet, and looked at Fane with grave speculation in her eyes.

"I should object to her, as I should object to a room without furniture. Have you ever

read 'A Cynic's Idea of the Future?' May I bring it you?"

"Please do. Now that Hugh is away, I always read in the evening."

"And which is the more interesting, the book or the husband?"

"The book, of course," she answered mendaciously, because she knew that he expected her to say the reverse.

He stood by her side till Miss Grenville called to them both to come and play, when he left her reluctantly to take his place at the further end. The four were well matched, so the game proceeded with animation, and one set followed another, with only a break for tea, till Mrs. Manners pulled out her watch, and said with the responsible air of a married woman, that it was time to be going home. Eva begged to differ from her; but Madge put on her gloves and a resolute expression at the same moment. Violet, not being on intimate terms with the Grenvilles, felt no inclination to accept an impromptu invitation, so she also unfurled her parasol to show that she was ready to start.

“Do stay,” said Eva earnestly. “Father is absolutely dying to make Miss Fitzroy’s acquaintance.”

“If he is not too quick about it, she will come and save his life another day. Good-bye,” with out-stretched hand.

“You sha’n’t go. Frank is coming down.”

“Not an unusual occurrence,” she said with a smile; but Fane, who was watching her intently, felt sure she had begun to waver. “Come, Violet.”

“No, Miss Fitzroy, I am not going to allow it. Madge, you know you couldn’t disappoint him.”

“As if he would care!” scornfully. “And you know we are so very untidy.”

When it came to a question of toilettes, Eva knew that she had gained her point. She was triumphant because her will had been victorious, without stopping to consider the why or the wherefore. When she had time for reflection, however, whilst her maid was dressing her hair, she astonished that sober-minded domestic by bursting into a sudden laugh, all because she discovered, or

fancied that she had discovered, that Madge, the proper, propriety-loving, prudish Madge Manners, was hovering on the brink of a flirtation !

CHAPTER VII.

“PITIFUL HUMAN NATURE !”

GODFREY FANE was fairly puzzled. He had conceived a high idea of Hugh's wife, and placed her yards above the manufacturer's fascinating daughter. He credited her with a refinement of mind, which would save her from the glaring social mistakes which many high-spirited girls fall into when they lose their heads, as well as their hearts, on their entrance into what they call “life,” the world of modern society. He went out of his way to be agreeable to her that evening, and talked on topics which he thought were sure to interest her ; and yet, though she bent her face towards his in an attitude of attention, he was conscious that her thoughts were straying, unprobable and ludicrous as it seemed, to that plump prosaic little stock-broker over

on the other side of the table. He remembered that dinner-party more than a year and a half ago, when Madge had impressed him with her strength of mind in refusing to gamble, though her husband gave her no support. He liked the way in which she held fast to the traditions of her old home, though her feet were treading for the first time on new ground, and he looked forward with pleasure to future meetings, when he would be able to give her some moral support in her elevated position without exactly going so far as to climb up by her side. Surely, if she were no automaton, working out the purpose of an immutable Fate, she would use her powers of free-will to keep, as she started on the higher road, where impulse is steadied by principle, and principle is governed by conscience. She would not voluntarily hurry down to the lower level, where women pit themselves against each other in an inglorious rivalry of toilettes and conquests, where love of admiration draws them on as if by an irresistible electric cord to the slippery edge at the end, where the refined

become absolutely vulgar, and the proud court the most abject humiliations, and the gentle-voiced join in the universal clamour for notice—notice at any price. He knew rather too much of the slang, the audacity, the thirst for notoriety, amongst the so-called “smart set.” This thirst which comes upon a woman like the plague, and results outwardly in outrageous combinations of colours, euphuistically called “daring mixtures,” each new frock more daring than the last, is the very bane of society. He was almost certain that Eya Grenville would be a prey to it, for she was always wanting to horrify him, and it was probable that she would succeed one day; but only a few hours ago he would have staked his head that Hugh’s wife was perfectly safe, as far above it as the topmost crag of a cliff with its proud head amongst the clouds, from “the cruel crawling tide” at its base. And yet if she were so different from those others who amused him whilst he laughed at them, what business had she to be casting such interested glances at Frank Wood, when she ought to be keeping her

whole interest for her husband in Spain, or else—a very important "or else"—for the man who was exerting his best conversational powers for her entertainment? Frank was getting on pretty well with the younger sister, if he could judge by appearances, for they seemed to be once or twice on the verge of a quarrel, and he considered that to be a sure sign of approaching intimacy. He smiled amusedly when Violet rose from her seat with a decided "I don't agree with you at all," and Wood, who was too late to open the door for the ladies, shrugged his shoulders aggressively, as if to say, "And I don't care a hang if you don't."

Madge was singing a little German ballad when the men went into the drawing-room, but she played the final chords just as Fane sauntered up to the piano.

"Da capo, please."

She shook her head, with a slight smile.

"No, simplicity is not to your taste."

"Milk and water simplicity, with no tone and no sweetness, I detest, but yours is altogether different."

"You are struggling after a compliment—don't trouble yourself." She let her fingers stray lightly over the notes, but cast a glance over her shoulder as she played.

"You would have sung for anyone else," he said shortly.

"Possibly," with a little provoking smile about her lips, which nettled him exceedingly. It was as if she surrounded herself with a prickly hedge, whenever he came near, which was doubly aggravating because she seemed to open all the gates to any and every chance acquaintance.

He leant his elbow on the piano, and looked down at her gravely. There were no lights on the piano, but a shaft of moonlight fell full upon the delicate beauty of her face, and gave a mysterious charm to her large, grey eyes.

"Mrs. Manners, why do you hate me?" he said abruptly.

A slight colour flew to her cheeks, her lips parted, but as he waited with unusual interest for the answer, up came Frank Wood, in a state of fervid impatience, which carried all

before it. He had not had a chance of speaking to Madge before dinner, and his uncle had chosen to detain him afterwards, just as he thought he was free, about some important matter, which he would have postponed till to-morrow, with a fine disregard of the improbability that any margin would be left for a business talk between his hurried breakfast and his start for the early train.

"Why stay in a stuffy room, Mrs. Manners, when the moon is asking you so plainly to come outside?" he said eagerly.

"Excuse me, the room is not stuffy, and it is only Frank Wood who is asking you," Fane struck in. "Won't you decide to stay?"

"You will have a poorer opinion of me than ever," she said quietly. "But the moon has a great attraction."

"The attraction is not in the moon, as all scientists will tell you," he said loftily.

"I don't need a scientist to decide about my likes and dislikes," as she moved towards the nearest window.

"I am sure a scientist, or anyone else,

would be puzzled to explain them." He shot out this remark at her vanishing head, but was only answered by a little laugh, which increased his irritation. Frank gave him a triumphant nod, and went off by her side, forgetting everything else in his eager desire to open his budget of news. Fane watched them, with a curious feeling of disapprobation. If it had been any other woman, he would not have cared to the extent of one moment's regret; but that Hugh's wife—that simple-minded Devonshire child, should stoop to a common flirtation with an ordinary fellow like Wood, as soon as her husband's back was turned, filled him with a sense of disgust. It was clear as day on the terrace-walk; he could have counted each blossom of the begonias in the grey stone vases, every leaf of a spray of ivy that hung over the edge of the balustrade; and, standing there in the window, he could see the expression on Madge's face. Was it the moonlight she was thinking of, as she turned it towards Frank, with a great eagerness in every line of it? No, the strange beauty of

the silent gardens in the cold, white light, and the dense, dark shadow, was lost upon her. She had forgotten it all in listening to what Frank Wood had to say to her! And over in Spain, that poor, deluded Hugh imagined that this precious wife of his was counting the days till his return. And perhaps she *was* counting the days, to see how many would be left to her of dear delightful freedom.

"What are you thinking of?" Eva asked him, as she came up to him, in her soft skirts of muslin and lace, and was struck by his tragic expression.

"I was thinking that human nature was the most pitiful thing in creation."

"I would not change with any other."

"Why not? If you had the chance?"

"Birds, beasts, insects and reptiles all prey upon each other—and I shouldn't like that."

"Don't we?" gloomily. "It is our natural instinct, and no amount of civilisation will ever cure us."

"But we do it more genteelly. I would

rather that you should pick my pocket, for instance, than my bones."

"Would you rather that I broke your heart or your neck? Tell me that."

She looked up into his sombre face with laughter in her eyes. "My heart—because I could get another man to mend it."

"Pshaw!" with infinite contempt. "I did not mean the conventional broken heart which consists of a sigh, a tear, and a torn up letter. If I could by any possible concatenation of circumstances leave you in desolate, grinding misery with no hope, no joy, no pleasantness, with a dread of to-morrow, and a hatred of yesterday, can you tell me that you would prefer that to being killed and cooked as a tempting mayonnaise?"

"Yes, I should," she said with decision. "Besides, the beasts don't cook each other; and there would be something so coarse in being eaten raw."

"But the one would last so much longer than the other," he persisted.

"No, it wouldn't with me. Take away

my happiness and I should die—die at once without the aid of strychnine or chloral."

He looked down at her dissentiently. She seemed to him to be brimming over with vitality down to her very finger-tips, and to think of death in connection with her rich ripe beauty was difficult, if not impossible. "You couldn't manage it, unless, perhaps, if you chose to rush into fever-dens, or to haunt small-pox hospitals."

"But I shouldn't choose. Don't the butterflies die in stormy weather?"

"Yes; but you are not a butterfly; you are a girl with a strong will, and an uncommonly healthy physique. I don't see why you should ever die, unless you should get smashed up in a railway accident."

"You talk as if I were a prize pig," she interrupted him impatiently. "Haven't I a mind, and hasn't my mind great influence on my body?"

"Perhaps. I don't find it so with women in general, it's rather the other way up."

"I don't believe I could live without happiness," she said solemnly, with a dreamy look in her usually bright eyes.

"I am sure you could," he rejoined unsympathetically, "just as well as all the jilted girls and heartbroken widows."

"It is evident to me that you don't understand women at all."

"Not understand them! Good heavens! when I've studied them from my last term at Eton."

"Yes, as you might a foreign language without a dictionary."

"I can read your thoughts whenever you talk to me."

"Then, I wonder that you ever talk to me again," she said with ready defiance, though the blood flew to her cheeks.

He smiled as he stroked his moustaches. "Perhaps I want to change them," he had the tact to suggest.

Just at that moment Madge came in at the window, followed by Frank. There was an unmistakable flush on her cheeks and a new light in her eyes. She talked to

Eva with quite an excited thrill in her voice about the delicious moonlight, and said it was a sin and a shame to lose it by staying indoors. Then, without one glance at Fane, she went up to the sofa where Violet was sitting with Mr. Grenville, and said it was high time to be going home.

Frank slipped out of the room, and Fane guessed at once that he was going to put on his boots so as to accompany the sisters. If he had been staying at the Park, he would have offered his own escort as well, out of kindly consideration for the absent Hugh, but the Chase lay in an opposite direction to the Priory, and he had to take his horse home as well as himself.

CHAPTER VIII.

DROPPING IN.

“VIOLET, only fancy, I’ve won a hundred and twenty pounds!” Madge cried with exultation in her eyes, as well as in her voice, as soon as she had got her sister all to herself in the solitude of her bedroom.

“But how? I don’t understand,” half inclined to believe that it must be a hallucination, as it seemed so incredible.

“No more do I, but it’s all through that dear, delightful Mr. Wood.”

Some of the delight went out of Violet’s expression.

“And what has he to do with it?” she asked with a tinge of severity.

“Everything. He made it for me somehow in the city.”

"It sounds rather shady, doesn't it?" she said slowly.

"That's just because you know nothing about it," with an air of superior knowledge. "He told me that an Archbishop would dance in his shoes to get the chance."

"What an extraordinary expression! I don't believe he knows anything about Archbishops," pursing up her lips.

"I don't care a bit so long as he knows about money," Madge said with an audacity that surprised her sister, who was not sure if this sentiment sounded quite orthodox. "And do you know what I am going to do with it? Save it all up till I can buy Hugh a partnership! Won't that be glorious?"

Violet looked at her sister's beaming face, and felt as if something kept her back from rising to the same height of enthusiasm.

"Partnerships cost such a heap," she said doubtfully.

"Of course they do; but as I've begun, I mean to go on. At this rate, I might make thousands in a whole year. And fancy Hugh's astonishment. It will be the most

glorious fun. Mind, not a word to him, on your honour ; promise, Violet ! ”

Violet promised readily enough ; and then she kissed her flushed face, and tried to rejoice with her ; but if you have to try you may as well give up, for your attempt is sure to be a failure. All the while she was conscious of a misgiving that there was something not quite right in the back-ground. If it was perfectly right and honest to gain money in such an easy expeditious way, why was anyone left with a nonsufficient income ? Why did Mr. So-and-So give up his carriage, or Lord Somebody else fly from the splendour of Park Lane to the moderation of South Kensington, without first trying his luck in the city ? Why need any impecunious beauty pawn her jewels, if a young unimpressive-looking stock-broker could quadruple thirty pounds in the same number of hours ? She was puzzled and uneasy, but she kept her own counsel, and listened to all Madge's fine castles in the air without trying to turn on a hose of cold water, which was much to her credit.

If a man once gets into the habit of dropping in at a given house, it grows upon him so quickly that after a time he can scarcely keep away. It was so with Frank Wood. On his way up to the Park, to leave a few flowers from Covent Garden ; after dinner, to bring an evening paper ; even sometimes in the morning, on his hurried drive to the station, to ask if either of the sisters had any commissions for him in town. Violet pretended to think him a bore, but in reality they were both glad to see him. It was pleasant after a long rainy day to have him coming in, brisk and cheerful, with the last tit-bit of gossip and the last exciting report going the round of the clubs. It seemed to bring them into touch with the gay world of which they knew so little ; and which they consequently imagined to be so far more delightful than it really was.

One Friday, when the day had been so oppressive that the sisters preferred sitting in the garden to taking either a walk or a drive, Frank Wood arrived earlier than

usual, having turned his back on business, on account of a headache. Madge gave him a cup of tea, and Violet prescribed a dose of strawberries, after which he lay on the grass at their feet, looking completely at his ease, and very much at home resting his hot head on his hand, as his eyes travelled from one pretty face to the other. Godfrey Fane felt an almost irresistible inclination to kick him when he came in and found him there, bare-headed and bumptious, as if he belonged to the house, or rather, as if the house and everything attached to it belonged to him. As for himself, he had a most laudable object, and he had this object well in view as he brought a chair up on his hostess's right side, and proceeded to engross her attention. He had brought "A Cynic's Idea of the Future," and he proceeded to talk about it, purposely excluding Frank, and leaving him to the rather *untender* mercies of Violet Fitzroy.

"'Everyone for self,' that is the motto of the present day ; and as selfishness kills

all nobility of thought or action, we shall never have another opportunity of canting about English glory."

"Mr. Fane, how can you say so?" Madge rushed into the argument with the fearlessness of her sex. "Look at Mr. Lindsay working so hard amongst a set of impracticable people who are wrapt up to their eyes in their cold, starched, respectability, and decline to be improved by the best of men. Do you dare to call him selfish?"

"I do," he said with a slight smile. "That sort of work is his greatest delight, and he could not be happy without it."

"But it shows that he is a noble man, and his work is noble too—you can't deny that."

"But it is a failure—you allow that, yourself. And as such gives small encouragement to a successor to pursue the same lines. Now the next rector—"

"Don't talk of another rector," she interrupted him hastily. "It would break my heart to part with Mr. Lindsay."

"Isn't that the most arrant selfishness?" he asked with keen enjoyment. "You know the poor man is terribly cramped as to money, and yet you won't spare him even to be made a Bishop."

"It's a case of mixed motives," she said with a slight blush. "Money is nothing to him, and if he could save one man here from an evil life he would feel himself amply repaid."

"Yes, but it would not feed, dress, and educate his children."

"His work comes before everything."

"You mean that he is so entirely engulfed in it that he can't think of his poor little brats? Then his selfishness has reached such a crisis as I never even dreamt of."

"You don't mean it, really? I know you don't," and she looked at him with grave eyes. "Mr. Fane, why do you make yourself out so much worse than you really are?"

"My humility. I am afraid you would like me still less than you do if you knew me as I really am."

"I do like you sometimes," she said slowly.

"You are too kind," he said with a short laugh. "I like you always, even when—"

"Even when?" she repeated shyly, as he stopped.

It was too tantalising of Eva Grenville to come in when Madge was waiting with eager curiosity for his answer, and Fane, who never meant to give it, was just congratulating himself on having distracted her attention entirely from Wood; but there she was in a cool buff cambric, and a large picturesque hat heaped with yellow roses of all shades. As she stepped out of the window, her eyes ran quickly over the group before her, and she paused in the act of going forward, as if not altogether pleased at what she saw.

Madge greeted her most cordially. Fane gave her a chair. Frank ran into the house to fetch another cup. Violet threw a despairing glance at the empty dish which had once contained the best strawberries in the

garden. Eva said she had not a minute to stay, though there was no particular reason for her to hurry home. She had come to invite them to go to Sandown the next day, an invitation which the two girls accepted joyfully. To Violet it opened a vision of unknown delight, and she looked up at the cloudy skies with imploring eyes.

“Oh, if you will give me this one fine day, you may rain for the next fortnight.”

“The farmers will be duly grateful to you for allowing their harvest to be spoilt, so long as you keep your best hat from being ruined,” Fane said drily.

“My best hat! I never gave it a thought,” she said indignantly.

“Incredible! When a girl receives an invite, her first thought is: ‘What shall I wear?’ Her second: ‘How I shall enjoy myself?’”

“You never were a girl, Mr. Fane, so you know nothing about it.”

“Being a man, I can reason by induction.”

“Your induction is wrong, because it springs from a groundless hypothesis.”

"Excuse me—from a general truth."

"Are you coming with us to-morrow?" Eva asked abruptly, with her eyes fixed on a copper-beech overhung by a grey willow.

"I should like it of all things," he said slowly.

James Robins, one of his uncle's grooms, had met with an accident the week before, and he had promised to go and see the poor fellow in a London hospital on this very Saturday. He wanted to go to Sandown for many reasons, but he was determined not to disappoint the man, and he was wondering if it would be worth while to drop down by a later train.

"That means that you don't intend to come," Eva said quickly. "Pray, don't put yourself out. We've made up a charming party, and we mean to have a lovely time."

"And so do I, if I can manage it."

She took no outward notice of this remark, but offered Frank a lift, and said she must be off. Fane followed her to her cart, but she would scarcely look at him,

throwing the most friendly glances over his shoulder at the two sisters, just for the sake of aggravation.

"I've scarcely had one word with you," Frank said in an injured tone, as he shook hands impressively with Madge.

"But you can talk to me any day," she said carelessly, and he was afraid to utter the retort which rose to his lips.

Fane looked thoughtfully after the little cart, which Miss Grenville was driving even more recklessly than usual. The high-spirited pony, insulted by a touch of the whip, dashed out of the gate, and whisked round the corner in a helter-skelter fashion which must have caused a collision if anything had been coming in the opposite direction. Fortunately the road was clear, so nothing happened, but Frank felt his position so insecure that he kept his eyes open for a soft bed of grass on which to be ejected.

"I should not like to be driven by Eva Grenville," Fane said to himself as he got on his horse. He was thinking of her all

the way homewards—uncertain, not altogether coy—nor yet hard to please—prone to take offence—but with a saving readiness to forgive—with an equal readiness also to run into extremes on slightest provocation—a girl with the fascination of the unexpected always hanging about her—a girl who would send a quiet sort of fellow into a madhouse or a coffin at the end of three weeks—a girl who, with all her beauty, dash and originality, was emphatically not the wife for Godfrey Fane. Having come to this conclusion, he thought of his uncle and his dinner, and quickened his thorough-bred's pace in consequence.

“Is Mr. Fane in love with anybody?” Violet asked as she took up her book, and made herself as comfortable as she could.

“With himself, I fancy. And now I'm off to Mrs. Schonk's, just for five minutes.” Madge was drawing on a pair of wash-leather gloves as she spoke, which entirely disguised the shape of her hands.

“Why go to-day?”

“Because I can't to-morrow. You see,”

looking grave, "I rather neglected Ruth, and when she died I felt as if I should never forgive myself. I daresay I shall very soon, but whilst it lasts it keeps me up to my duty towards little Jess."

CHAPTER IX.

SANDOWN.

ALL was charming at Sandown, except the luck, which was adverse to most of the party from Letherleigh. The sloping lawn looked as usual like a flower-garden, the blooms for which had been gathered from many diverse climes. Sometimes amidst the fire of chaff and wit, and the soft subdued laugh of refined civilisation, there was a voice which struck a deeper tone ; and every now and then amongst the empty, frivolous, smiling faces, there was one whose grave eyes and compressed lips told of some tragedy lived through in silence amongst all the accessories of comedy. The excitement which had been simmering during the earlier part of the day rose to fever-heat, when

some of the best racing blood in the world competed for the Eclipse Stakes.

Unfortunately, Frank Wood, bewildered by the high merits of the three competitors, put Madge's modest sovereign on the wrong horse, so that vague and distant hope of a partnership was not brought one inch nearer by any gains at Sandown. He watched the clouds gather on her pretty face, and felt, with the absurd quixotism of an unconsidered impulse, that he would gladly have sacrificed half the allowance which his father gave him if that could have secured him better luck. Even the luncheon was not as cheerful as the one at Epsom. Madge missed her husband, Eva was always casting glances right and left in search of Fane. If he had been there it is possible that she would not have complained so much of the heat of the room, or the dilatoriness of the waiters, or regretted that they had not arranged to bring their luncheon with them, and eat it on the drag.

Disappointment is apt to make people critical, in consequence of which Mr. Osgood

Lewin, when trying to make capital out of Fane's absence, found the latter more unsatisfactory than his presence. The remembrance of the drive from Epsom was still fresh in his memory, and when circumstance was favourable, he himself unchanged, and no rival was there to eclipse him, he could not understand why Miss Grenville should give such scant attention to his remarks or be as chary of her smiles, as a much badgered Minister of additions to the pension-list.

It was during the hush of expectation, when the race of the day was being run, that Eva became suddenly conscious that Fane was near at hand. Her eyes brightened, but she said nothing, outwardly absorbed in the same event as all the rest of the excited crowd, her eyes were fixed on the horses as they flashed past; but when the winner's name was shouted in one mighty shout, and those who were near passed on the cry to the others who were further off, when there was a general forsaking of long-cherished chairs, and everyone seemed to be talking, and nobody had time to listen, Eva Grenville

stood quite still, as inanimate as a mushroom under her much-befrilled parasol. For once in her life, she was determined not to take the initiative, although she had been inclined to consider this line of action as her special prerogative. Therefore she waited for perhaps one minute and a half, which seemed to her impatience like half an hour, and when at last she allowed herself the relaxation of turning her head, she had the satisfaction of seeing Godfrey Fane in the act of vanishing in the direction of the paddock, with a tall girl by his side, whom she recognised as his cousin, Lady Ermyntrude Forsythe.

"I wish Mr. Fane were here," Madge said, without a suspicion that he was at the moment only a few yards away.

"He *is* here ; but why do you want him ?" Eva asked quickly.

"Because you said he could point out all the 'beauties' and celebrities, and I'm rather country-cousinish, you know," she answered with a deprecatory smile.

"I know a good few of them by sight.

Shall we take a turn?" Frank suggested eagerly.

"Yes ; come Vi," Madge said, throwing a look over her shoulder. Violet came, and soon dropped behind with Wood, as Major Marston and Captain Seagrave turned up, and were delighted to find that the pretty girl in the white Surah trimmed with heliotrope whom most of the men of their set had singled out for their admiration, was the wife of their old chum Hugh Manners. Violet employed herself in the congenial occupation of teasing Frank Wood, who had begun by admiring her simply because she was Madge's sister, but had already reached the stage of admiring her now, because she was herself. She was so like Madge, and yet so entirely different, that his feelings towards her changed every time they met, although with regard to the former they were the same now as on the day he first saw her, only more intensified. The two sisters enjoyed themselves thoroughly, charmed by the constant succession of ravishing frocks and pretty faces, delighted

at being for once in the very midst of the gay world, feeling "of it," and not "out of it," because of the many people who were so anxious to make the most of a shred of acquaintance in order to join their party. Frank always had an appropriative feeling towards his friends, and in the midst of his cheerful talk with Violet, had leisure to be aggrieved at the way in which those two army men took possession of Mrs. Manners. He could not guess that the charm of their conversation lay in the fact that they talked a good deal about her husband. Madge was deeply interested in every detail of his life during the few years he had spent in the Blue Hussars, and was surprised to find that he had been considered the wag of the regiment. It gave her food for reflection in the future ; but at present there was no time for thought. Presently there was another race, and she found herself seated on a chair near the front, with Fane standing behind it. He had secured it for her, knowing that she was a novice, and smiled as he thought that it

was Wood's turn to look after Violet Fitzroy.

"Which horse have you backed?" he asked in a low voice.

"Not one. I lost on the last," in a doleful tone.

"Glad to hear it," with unfeeling sincerity.

"Might I ask why?" coldly.

"Because a betting woman is my special aversion."

"Then you must hate a good many people. Everyone does it," with an air of much worldly experience.

"Yes? I hoped there were a few exceptions," very quietly.

Madge flushed, and gave the grass a tap with one foot. "Of course you know ever so much better than I."

"It is because I do know that I take the liberty of advising you. You can't hold a woman in. She begins by betting a sov., shall we say? she ends—nobody knows quite the rights of it, but it's generally a sorry tale."

"Mr. Fane, you make a point of being right, but I would disagree with you, if I could," she said with a nervous little laugh, and went on, moved by an urgent desire for self-exculpation. "But I'm not like those other women. It isn't the money exactly—"

"No ; but the excitement, and the love of that is almost as bad as—"

"Oh ! but really it isn't the excitement," the pink in her cheeks growing deeper.

"Then what is it in the name of all that's whimsical ?"

"Ah," with a long-drawn breath, "that is a secret."

"Wood knows it !" he exclaimed, with a sudden intuition, whilst it flashed across him that he had possibly found a solution to the enigma that puzzled him.

"Hope you are saying nothing bad of me?" Frank called out, as he caught his own name.

"You had better ask Mrs. Manners," and Fane moved away, irritated by the

thought that Frank had attracted the confidence which was so persistently withheld from himself. It was so intensely absurd on the face of it! He drew himself up and folded his arms, lost in thought, forgetful of the eager chattering crowd around him, and almost, but not quite, of the horses who were in the act of preparing for the start.

When the race was over, and they were crossing the course to reach their drag, Frank began to apologise once more for having brought such bad luck on Madge.

"It was all somebody's fault," he assured her, and he would willingly have lost all his other ventures if that could have brought her success.

"Think what you did for me the other day," she said, with a kindly wish to console him. "And perhaps you will give me another chance before very long?"

"Such chances don't occur every day, I am sorry to say, though I don't know what would become of the "House" if they did," he added with a short laugh.

“Fortunes would go up and down at such a pace that a man would never know if to-morrow would make him a bankrupt or a millionaire.”

She stopped still in blank disappointment, with both hands clasped on the handle of her white parasol, the point of which she was digging recklessly into the ground. She was just in the confident stage of youth when castles in the air seem to have the strength and solidity of Windsor itself. Her eyes were mentally fixed on the loveliest structure in the world,—that is, in the world of her imagination—and she saw with dismay every proud turret and lofty pinnacle disappearing from the comforting land of the “probable,” into the shadows and mists of that of mere “possibility.” Only as it vanished from her did she realise the intense sweetness of her dream. To have Hugh with her always—what would she not have been ready to do in order to make it possible! The race-course, the concourse of drags, the crowded lawn in the distance, all seemed

blotted out from her sight, for she saw nothing except a thin, worn, but infinitely good-looking face, with the kindest, truest eyes that ever looked into a woman's. Her heart went out to him on a wave of longing. He would come back to her she knew, but only to go again; and she felt at that moment as if she could never steel herself to bear another separation.

"Then you won't be able to do anything for me in the City just yet?" she asked after a pause, in a voice that *would* falter in spite of her efforts to steady it.

"No—not just yet," he said reluctantly, for he saw a tremble about the corners of her pretty mouth, which made his own heart feel rather inordinately tender. "You see I should be more careful with your money than with my own, and I'd cut my throat sooner than let you in for anything risky."

"But, Mr. Wood, what is the meaning of all those advertisements you see in the papers? I thought something could be

done every hour of every day," she asked, feeling puzzled as well as depressed.

"My dear Mrs. Manners, never take the smallest notice of them," he exclaimed with all the horror natural to a member of the "House" for anything like outside brokerage. "If you want to keep a roof over your head, or a coin in your purse, never—"

"Sorry to interrupt you—" Madge looked up in surprise to find Osgood Lewin at her side, and wondered how much he had overheard—"but the horses are in, and Mr. Grenville is waiting."

"And I was only waiting for Mr. Grenville," she said quietly. And then she went on towards the drag, with the graceful walk that was habitual to her, and without any of the hurry or the flurry which might have come from an interrupted flirtation. Marston, Seagrave, and a knot of men were standing by the drag, but engrossed with her own thoughts she took no notice of them, and was scarcely conscious of the fact that it was Fane who,

with the gravity of a Parsee, handed her up on to the box-seat. Only when the two Hussars asked if they might run down some day and see "dear old Manners," and have a chat about old times, she told them rather rashly, but with the sweetest smile, that Hugh would be ever so glad to see them, and they might be certain of a welcome whenever they chose to come.

"Mr. Wood, you look as if you had been attending a funeral instead of a race-course," Violet remarked after they had gone a few miles, during which he had contributed but little to the conversation. "And as for my sister, she might have been the chiefest of mourners."

"I've been playing the part of sexton," he said in a low voice, "digging a grave for her hopes."

"I am rather glad than not," Violet confided to him in a whisper, with a sudden outburst of confidence. "She has been quite changed since she took to thinking of the City and all sorts of impossible things. It will be such a relief when she sinks back

into prosaics, with nothing particular to hope or despair about."

"Is that your idea of a pleasant life?" he asked with raised eyebrows. "It sounds like always walking on a level road, in the straightest of lines. It might be easy going, but deadly monotonous."

"It would be something to know what is before you."

"Thanks, I'd rather not," with a decided shake of his head. "A flat road, like a ruled line? No, Miss Fitzroy, I'm a prosaic fellow, every inch of me; but hang it all! I suppose I've got my illusions like the rest of them."

"Illusions are out of date," she said with her mouth pursed up primly, but her eyes brimful of laughter. "Bald, bare realism is the craze, either in talk or in writing."

Then[¶] Frank made a speech which took himself by surprise, as he looked up into the girl's pretty face, innocent of paint, or pearl powder, or any artificial charm. "You can afford to be real, for there is no room

for improvement, and nothing whatever to hide."

She opened her eyes a little wider than usual, whilst an unaccustomed blush deepened the colour in her cheeks. "You can't tell one little bit," she said with a laugh. "I may be a walking fraud."

The two were very good friends by the time they reached Letherleigh Park, where the sisters were going to dine, and Violet, as she dressed for dinner, kept smiling to her own reflection in the looking-glass, as she thought of some grand piece of chaff she was concocting for Frank's benefit. Fane had come back with the Grenvilles, and confided to Eva on the way home that Sir Adam had finally decided to resign his seat, and had begged his nephew to stand in his place.

"You consented of course?" she said eagerly, as her thoughts went a journey through all the pleasant possibilities of canvassing, seeing Fane, as it were, at the end of a long vista, as the victorious candidate, making a speech from the balcony

of the Red Lion, confronted by an enthusiastic crowd.

“Why of course?”

“Because then you may have a chance of leading a life that is worthy of you,” and she looked up at him, her eyes kindling with altruistic ambition.

He was quite taken aback, for he had done her the injustice to think that if he dangled at her heels, played tennis when a fourth was wanted, dined at the Park whenever he was asked, he would have fulfilled “the whole duty of man” according to the views of Miss Grenville. It was a great surprise to find that, on the contrary, she took the same view as Mr. Lindsay, and actually considered that he was wasting his time!

“Lindsay has been talking to you.”

“I am capable of forming an opinion without his help,” she said loftily.

“I get through a good deal of work in one way or another,” he said slowly, “I am practically my uncle’s agent.”

“And any Smith, Brown or Jones would

do as well," contemptuously. "Some of the best and the cleverest men in England stand back and let a set of long-tongued nobodies take possession of the House. They don't like to rub shoulders with cads, they don't like to be kept in London when they are longing to hunt, or fish, or shoot, and so, just for the sake of their swagger, or for their paltry amusements, they go their own way, and live their own selfish lives, whilst any prating idiot, without a name or a standpoint, is good enough to help in the government of their country. It makes me mad to think of it."

She looked splendidly handsome as she said it, her eyes lighted up with generous enthusiasm, her cheeks glowing with the depth of her feeling.

Fane looked at her with increasing astonishment.

"You go too far, and ignore many good fellows, but you have converted me to Female Suffrage and all its fullest consequences," he said quietly. "You would be the very member for Mid-Surrey."

"Oh! if I were only a man, they should hear of me," she said with an electric flash in her eyes.

"Perhaps not, your feminine loquacity might desert you."

"As if I only meant that I should talk!" indignantly.

"Why not? It is all talk nowadays. The situation is governed by the tongue."

"Man being the only animal endowed with speech, that isn't wonderful," she said with an amused laugh.

"Monkeys are running us very close," he rejoined for pure fun, "to judge by the pamphlets on the Simian tongue."

CHAPTER X.

“OUT OF IT.”

HUGH MANNERS' sunburnt face looked out of the window of a smoking-carriage as the “8.55” steamed into the well-known station of Letherleigh. As soon as the train stopped, he was on the platform, already giving directions about his things being sent up. As he turned away, a slight figure brushed past him in a great hurry, and disappeared into a third-class carriage. There was something furtive in the action, as if the girl for some reason wished to escape observation. And it was this that momentarily attracted his attention; but his thoughts were so full of his return to his wife that he had no room in his mind for anything else, and it was not till much later that the conviction flashed across him

that it was the same mysterious being who had appealed to his compassion, and yet left him so abruptly one soft September night more than a year and a half ago. In his eager impatience to reach his home, he forgot all about her for the present. He had not been able to fix the hour of his intended arrival, which accounted for the fact that there was no one at the station to meet him ; but he knew that Madge would be listening to every sound, and he fully expected to see the flutter of a white skirt as soon as he set foot in his own carriage-drive. As he entered the gate he threw away his cigarette, and a smile flew to his lips. The front door was wide open, which he usually considered as a rash invitation to passing tramps, but found personally convenient at the moment. As he stepped into the hall there was not a sound to be heard. It wasn't possible that Madge could have gone out when she knew that he was coming! No, a thousand times no; he positively derided the idea, though it had given him a momentary chill. He hung

up his hat on its own familiar peg, passed his hand over his brown hair, and then softly opened the drawing-room door. He stood quite still, the brightness going slowly out of his face like the sun from a landscape. There was Madge—her delicate face and head standing out against the background of the curtain, her eyes fixed intently on the upturned countenance of Frank Wood as he sat on a low seat at her feet!

Outside there was all the shadowy beauty of the garden, where the copper-beach looked dark as night against the silvery whiteness of the willow, and the evening star stole out into a cloudless sky; but she had no attention to give to it. Her whole powers seemed to be bent upon what the young stock-broker was telling her, and as his eyes met hers, they answered their glance with one of frank, if not bold, admiration, to which she must have been well accustomed, for she showed no sign of shrinking from it. This was rather different from what he had expected, but it is only in fairy tales that

the result equals, or even sometimes exceeds the anticipation. He had felt so sure that the house would scarcely be able to contain her, when she once knew that he was coming. If she did not haunt the station like a poor ghost looking for its lost body, at least she would be in the garden, hovering near the gate. Instead of which, here she was, sitting in the drawing-room with an "ordinary acquaintance," fully engrossed in this most uninteresting outsider, without one single thought to spare for her husband! He drew a deep breath, for his throat felt dry.

"Didn't you get my letter?" he asked in a level tone, out of which all the joy had dwindled.

At the first word, she looked up with startled eyes. Then the colour rushed into her pale cheeks. She sprang from her chair with a flash of joy.

"Hugh!" she gasped with a laugh and a sob, and the next moment her arms were round his neck, her sweet face nestling close against his own.

"Oh, why didn't you tell me?" she asked after a pause, taking hold of his face between her small white hands, and studying every line of it critically. "You said 'Wednesday,' and you mentioned no train, but I meant to live at the station till you came. And I meant to have on my very best frock too, and to have the nicest dinner for you, and now there is nothing fit to eat, and I'm a horrid dowdy."

"Didn't I say 'Tuesday'?" What a duffer I was!" he said with mollified feelings. "You look a thousand times nicer than anyone I have seen since I left, and as to dinner, I could eat donkey-ribs, and like them, so don't worry yourself about that." Then he remembered Frank Wood, and peered over her shoulder with a feeling of awkwardness that was new to him. But Frank was gifted with a certain amount of tact, and that took him out into the garden, where he diligently smoked the blight off the roses, as Madge and Violet had often requested him to do. He had considered it heretofore as a very interesting operation,

and one to which he was glad to lend the fragrance of his cigar. But this evening, the movements of a caterpillar had no charms for him, and there was an absolute want of excitement in knocking off a predatory snail. In fact, there was too much similarity between his own position at the moment and that of the insect. For the return of Captain Manners seemed to have knocked him off his balance, and he was disagreeably startled to find how much it had upset him. He could not remember that he had ever rejoiced at his departure, but at the same time it was impossible to ignore the fact that he was desperately sorry for his return. It was a nuisance, to put it as mildly as he could. He felt already as if the husband's advent had put a stop to the pleasant friendship, which had given such a zest—such a dash of poetry to his most prosaic life. He had plenty of friends, for he was popular amongst those of his own set, and he had many threads of interest outside and beyond the sphere of his business, but this corner of a village

in Surrey seemed to be more to him than all the rest of the universe just at present. It was something apart—far removed from all the dull, sordid, money-grubbing cares of the Stock Exchange, and equally separated from the garish delights of dissipation. He had no evil thought in his honest heart—no wish to drag Madge Manners down from the heights of her womanly purity, but he longed with an intense longing to be allowed to go on just as they were—to listen to her sweet voice as she poured out her confidences, to look into her large grey eyes and try to fathom their depths, to feel that he was in return looked upon as a friend—a tried friend, who could be applied to in any moment of trouble or emergency. It did not seem an enormous amount to ask, and many fellows in the same position would have asked more, and even claimed it as a right, but the expression on Captain Manners' face, as he stood at the door of his own drawing-room, seemed to stand in the way of even such a humble request as this being granted.

Violet Fitzroy was dining with the Templetons, so there was nobody to console the poor young stock-broker, and he felt entirely "out of it" as he watched the gradual lighting up of the rooms on the ground floor, and knew for a certainty that he was forgotten. She might have put her head out just to see what had become of him, or to ask what he was doing, but it was clear as the daylight that had died more than an hour ago, that she hadn't given a thought to him since her husband had appeared at the door. Then Madge's laugh broke upon the silence—joyous as that of a happy child who has just acquired a coveted play-thing—sweet and low, but infinitely joyous—and that gave the finishing stroke to his discontent. He threw away his cigar in a pet, and made his way past the lighted windows of the empty drawing-room, round by the side of the house, into the front carriage-drive, and so into the high-road, feeling as if he had been forcibly pushed to the wrong side of the door,

in consequence of the advent of Captain Manners. He walked slowly up to the Park, making his way through a gap in the fence which was always going to be mended and persistently forgotten. All the spring went out of his walk, all the alertness out of his bearing. He was but the limpest imitation of his former self, when he walked into the large drawing-room, and after traversing the broad expanse of white drugget, subsided into an armchair by the piano.

Eva looked down on him with a mischievous smile. "Enter Captain Manners, exit Frank Wood," she said significantly.

"I took myself off because I didn't like to be in the way," he muttered shamefacedly.

"Ah, my dear boy, I don't pity you a bit," with an air of moral superiority.

"Look here, Eva, you don't understand, and you never will," he said in a tone of exasperation. And then he got up murmuring something about a puppy which he must look after, and made his way into

the stables, where he was safe from the reach of her chaff.

Violet Fitzroy was meanwhile dining with the Templetons, and finding it very pleasant. Mrs. Templeton was fond of novelties, and as soon as a stranger appeared in the neighbourhood, was ready to pounce if he or she were in any way presentable. Violet could scarcely have been described by the most carping of critics as simply presentable. Her pleasant girlish talk, her bright audacious opinions, emphasised or softened by the brilliance of her eyes and the frankness of her smile, would have made her an addition to any party, even without the beauty of her face, or the grace of her round, supple figure. She sat on Mr. Templeton's right hand, with Dr. Patrick Ford on her left. The barrister was not so much of an Athenian as his wife, but nevertheless he liked to depart from the usual groove when sending out invitations. He looked upon the young doctor as an agreeable fellow, who was dropped by the neighbourhood because he drank. Now it

was certainly probable that the more he was dropped the more he would drink, and thereby be lost to his profession, as he was already to society. So Mr. Templeton stretched out a helping hand, and Dr. Ford found himself, to his own great surprise, at the barrister's hospitable table and next door to the pretty Miss Fitzroy, whom he had often met in his drives round the country, and as often admired. To say that he was Irish was equivalent to proving that he was also susceptible, and before the end of that dinner he was ready to pledge himself, both body and soul, if she would have deigned to receive the pawn-ticket, and make use of it afterwards. Violet had heard all about him, part of it false, but a good deal of it true, and regarded him with aversion as well as with curiosity.

Towards the end of the evening, however, she came to the conclusion that he might be *pronoxious*, but that he was not *obnoxious* for she exerted such a refining influence, by her own gentle manners and dainty appearance, that the poor young fellow, who

was always peculiarly sensitive to the moral atmosphere in which he was placed, instinctively rose to a higher level, and showed the best side of his character. He could talk well, with a rough sort of eloquence, on national topics ; and when with a spice of mischief, Mr. Templeton started " Home Rule," Violet was delighted with the blaze of fire-works that ensued. The barrister remained cool, calm, and contemplative as any Alderney standing knee-deep in rich grass, but Ford presented a vivid contrast to him. He was Irish to the very tip of his fingers, and therefore full to the brim of wildest contradictions. Soft as putty towards evicted tenants, who had refused to do a stroke of work to keep a roof over their useless heads ; hard as flint towards the beggared landlords, who could scarcely pay for the food and clothing of their children, and had no margin left for their education ; with an unfailing stock of whimsical, high-faluting talk, a small stratum of common sense for other people's matters, but not an ounce for his own ; with lofty views as to the

religion and the politics of his country, and nothing of the sort for his own life, as he dragged it out between the cheerful conviviality of the bar at "The Red Lion" and the dull loneliness of the White House; a man capable of rare generosity, and of noble ideals, yet practically living a low degraded life, morally and mentally starving himself, within reach of a rich harvest, hiding away in the shadow and turning a morose back on the cheerful sunshine.

When the evening was over, and the guests had almost all departed, he got into his cart, a happier man than he had been for years. The personality of Mrs. Schonk no longer overshadowed his brain, like a vulture ready to pounce. He had resisted the temptations of Mr. Templeton's '47 port, and was conscious that he had played his part well both in the dining-room and afterwards with the women in the drawing-room. He was in a perfectly exultant state of mind, ready to hold his own with anyone. Ah! if he could get a girl like Miss Fitzroy to care for him, he felt that he might rise

to some height which had seemed for ever out of reach. He broke out into a wild Irish ballad, as he drove quickly through the honey-suckled, sweet-scented silence of the lanes, and felt as happy as any boy at the beginning of the holidays. Only when he passed Rose Cottage, the song died away on his lips, and the bright stars overhead no longer seemed to hold a fair promise of the future.

CHAPTER XI.

“THE MOST INTERESTING MAN IN THE
PARISH !”

VIOLET FITZROY was stepping along briskly over the puddles in the road, holding up her skirts with great care, and at the same time jeopardising the safety of the fruit in a small basket which she carried on her arm. It had rained violently during the morning, and the climate had changed from that of the tropics to the chilly atmosphere of Northern Russia ; so the pink cambric had been discarded for a comfortable serge. But the freshness of the air had brought a pretty pink to her cheeks, to atone for the absence of it in her dress, and a cheerful smile was on her lips as she thought of the dinner-party, now only a few hours ago. A very large puddle obtruded itself between

the damp ground on which she stood and the more solid pathway. It necessitated something between a long stride and a short jump, and she managed it very well, only the cherries jumped still more readily, and came out of the basket and on to the path, whilst a few tumbled into the water. With an exclamation of impatience at her own carelessness, she was about to kneel on the path, when a voice with an unmistakable Irish accent said quickly :

“ Allow me,” and in a moment Dr. Ford was at her feet. “ Can’t I carry them anywhere for you ? ” he asked, as soon as he had picked them all up except those that were in the puddle.

“ Thanks ever so much, I was only taking them to that little girl at Mrs. Schonk’s,” looking down at her basket, and yet conscious of a great longing to see if his face changed.

The bright, alert look went out of it at once, and he gave her back the basket as if he wished to have nothing more to do with it. His usually glib tongue was silent as he

prodded a muddy cherry so viciously that it disappeared into the damp earth.

The wish to reform a sinner, especially such a good-looking one, was rampant in the girl's heart, and she had the usual feminine belief in the power of her own looks and words to effect that purpose. She might never have another opportunity of speaking to him on the subject, or of finding out his real opinion. The stories against him might have been invented by fraud or malice. He was said to be a hopeless drunkard, and she jumped to the bold conclusion that there was no truth whatever in the report, because she had found him sober the evening before, as well as this morning. She thought, at least, she would test his ideas about that odious woman, so she said with a deliberation that was unusual to her: "Do you know that I could almost vote for the introduction of the Russian Knout if the first victim were to be Mrs. Schonk?"

He looked away from her down the road, wondering how much she knew. At the moment, he felt that he would not have

minded the whole of Letherleigh knowing what he had done, if only the knowledge of it could have been kept from this one girl. "I have heard that women are proverbially merciless to each other," he said with affected carelessness, "but I should not have expected such a remark from you, Miss Fitzroy."

"Wasn't she merciless to little Ruth Martin?" she asked quickly, fixing him at the same time with her bright, penetrating eyes.

For one instant he looked startled, the next, he quickly recovered himself with all the readiness of an Irishman. "If you ask me, I should say that Nature was more merciless than anyone else. Did you ever see such a—such a—"? And then he began to stammer, for, as he was going to say "such a hideous little monkey," he thought of the child lying as he had last seen her—with the tragic story of her life written across her emaciated face, and that remembrance was sufficient to tie his tongue.

"I never saw her, Dr. Ford," Violet said

gravely, "but I have heard a great deal about her. I hope you will keep an eye on that other dear little thing—"

"I've nothing to do with her," he broke in hastily. "Let the parsons keep a lookout if they like, I wash my hands of all responsibility."

"But you can't," she said quietly, still with that determination not to be baffled which was one of her most striking characteristics, whilst the doctor was divided between a wish to escape, and a reluctance to give up his one chance of talking to Violet Fitzroy. He stood there to be tortured rather than put an end to it, keeping a strict guard over his expression as well as over his words, enjoying the softness of her voice, the prettiness of form and feature, the peculiar charm which her bright personality possessed for one who had so much gloom in his life; and yet all the while agonised by the fear of what was in the background of her mind. Something must be prompting her to make these allusions to a most disagreeable topic, instead

of falling back on the weather, which had changed quite sufficiently to form a respectable subject of conversation. "If anything happens to Jess she will be sure to call you in to prevent having an inquest. But don't wait for that," earnestly. "Tell the woman that she shall be hanged if the child dies."

"She would only laugh in my face. The child is healthy enough, and the mother pays for her," he added as an after thought.

"That shows exactly what you think," Violet rejoined eagerly. "Oh, Dr. Ford, I mayn't be here, but I shall hear every word about it. If I only knew you better, I would ask you to promise to watch over her."

He looked down into the eager face with the blush still irradiating it which had been brought there by her own words, and his heart gave a leap.

"You never will know me better, Miss Fitzroy," he said with an unconscious touch of pathos in voice and eye. "By

the merest chance I rose to the surface of respectable society last night; but as a rule the dear kind Letherleighites pass me by with an acidulated bow, or affect not to see me when I'm only a yard off."

"You are too busy, perhaps, to make friends," she said with a small amount of embarrassment, as she thought of her sister's unmitigated horror of him.

"Too busy—or too idle—too something, at anyrate—people might differ as to the cause," he said carelessly. "It's my own fault, I'll acknowledge that," impelled to honesty by the expression of Violet's most candid eyes.

"Well, good-morning, Dr. Ford," she said cheerfully, remembering that it was certainly time to move on. "Though you have confessed your fault, I won't give you absolution. It is such a pity to be unsociable."

"Unsociable!" he broke out almost passionately. "By my soul! it's not that. People judge you by your actions—and you say that's fair—but how on earth is

any outsider to tell the cause of those actions? It would have been so delightful to give you that promise you asked for just now; you would have gone away thinking, if you thought at all of me, that I was not half bad after all—”

He was walking by her side, and she supposed herself to be anxious to get rid of him; and yet, true to her object, which she considered of far more importance than a petty conventional scruple, she could not help flashing one bewildering glance at him as she asked:

“Then why didn’t you give it, Dr. Ford?”

“Because I could not have kept it,” he said hoarsely. “It is out of my power to play the part of a Providence to that child, and I would not act a lie, even to make you think better of me.” Then he took off his hat, and departed before she could get out the “Why?” which was actually on the tip of her tongue.

She walked on with plenty of subjects for meditation, and reached Rose Cottage

before she had got to the end of them. Jessie ran to meet her, nearly breathless with the great news that a new baby had come, "such a ickly tiny ting, I can tarry her up an' down."

"Is she a sister of yours?" Violet asked with a pang of pity for the poor child, who was to be exposed to the chances of Mrs. Schonk's tender mercies.

"No; my mummy 'longs to me, nobody else," Jess said with a nod of proud satisfaction.

"And when did you see her last?"

"Don't know! it's a long, long time always, and then she comes in at th' door, and me loves her so," opening her small arms wide as if to enclose an imaginary mother in their compass.

Violet stooped and kissed her impulsively, and then, kneeling down on the pathway, popped a cherry into her sweet cherub lips. The child's laugh rang out sweet and clear as she tried with all her might to play "bob-cherry." But her own intense amusement baffled her, for she could not

keep grave when she was trying to draw in the stalk. Mrs. Schonk came out with a baby in her arms, who might be about six months old. She showed her off to Miss Fitzroy, calling for her admiration of plump fingers and toes, and saying that she belonged to a lady in London who was in a high position, and could not be worried with having children on her hands morning, noon and night.

"I should be very sorry to leave them in anyone else's hands," Violet said with severity.

"Ah! you've never had any of your own, miss, so you can't tell what a handful they are," Mrs. Schonk rejoined with an air of superior knowledge. "That Jess has a wonderful sperrit of her own, but she's as good as a walking advertisement, as I was told the other day. She never ails nothing, and no born princess could have a prettier face."

"Me velly pritty; ev'ybody says so," the child remarked in a matter-of-fact tone, and then, taking advantage of Violet's

presence, she threw down the hoe with which she had been busily engaged, and darted after a butterfly, her golden hair floating like a sunbeam behind her, her happy laugh ringing through the garden.

With that picture of the laughing child fixed on the retina of her mind, Violet went home in a cheerful state of relief; for, as she told Madge, she began to think that Mrs Schonk had been misjudged as to her conduct towards Ruth, as Jess seemed so happy under her care.

"I am quite willing to think that all will go right now that Hugh has come home," Madge said with a fine access of wifely pride.

"I don't quite see what he has to do with it," Violet hazarded, for the sake of common sense.

"My dear! he is so clever."

"I daresay; but all the cleverness in the world isn't worth half so much in this case as one honest doctor."

"And that we haven't got," with decision.

Violet looked thoughtfully out of the window. "Dr. Ford is to me the most interesting man in the village."

Mrs. Hugh Manners dropped the rose which she was about to place in a vase, and stared at her sister in unmitigated astonishment. Words utterly failed her, but her wide-open eyes spoke whole tomes.

"Why not, indeed?" Violet went on, with some scorn in her fresh young voice. "All the others—Godfrey Fane, Frank Wood, etc., have been carved and polished by conventionality till you know exactly what they are likely to say or do under any given circumstances, whilst in Dr. Ford you have the real man—"

"And you long to change him for anything else," Madge put in quickly.

"The real man," Violet repeated, with a light in her eyes which might have come from indignation or enthusiasm; "not an article out of which all originality has been scraped and pared. When he talks, he means what he says—"

"I believe it would be better if he didn't."

"You like a man who borrows his ideas and conversation from the papers and magazines which he happens to read, whilst I prefer one who brings out his own, however crude they may seem to us at first."

"Dearest Vi, much as I love you, I'm not altogether sorry that you are going back to Devonshire," Madge said slowly, and with a solemn shake of her head.

"I can quite believe it," replied her sister with a calm air of superiority. "Matrimony is a most cramping process to the feminine mind. When Hugh is within a few yards of you, you haven't a thought beyond, and a sister is utterly wasted on you." Having thus turned the enemy's flank, she ended the discussion by retiring to her own room, where she broke into a little laugh of intense amusement at the brief passage of arms.

CHAPTER XII.

A FIRST QUARREL.

HUGH MANNERS and Godfrey Fane were walking down Arundel Street, Strand, to the embankment, enjoying a friendly chat about much that had happened during the former's sojourn in Spain. Hugh confided to Fane that affairs had been going on very badly at San José, and that Mr. Whiffin was so displeased with the head of the office there that he threatened to dismiss him, and put him in his stead.

"Talk him out of that, there's a good fellow, for we can't do without you down at Letherleigh; you would leave a hole that all the retired cheesemongers and unretired stock-broking chaps together could not half fill up. Miss Grenville and all the rest,"

with a smile as he thought of Frank Wood, "would be lost without your wife."

"Don't imagine that I want to go. I mean to stick to the Priory like a ferret to a rat. I like the little place. I like the people; but there's the future to consider, and I've no Cræsus for a relation, longing to bequeath me his pile of tin."

"I could spare you one or two of mine, but they wouldn't seem to see—worse luck. Just look at this," staring up at a house which they were in the act of passing, the doorway of which was adorned with a brass plate on which it was intimated that Mr. Dorrien White was always within from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. "Innocent-looking place isn't it? and yet I believe it to be a den of iniquity. And there goes its arch-fiend as I fancy," he exclaimed, as Osgood Lewin jumped out of a hansom and passed through the swing-door, with great celerity, and his head turned over his left shoulder, as if to hide his face from them.

“Gambling?” Captain Manners asked laconically.

“Of a sort, with scrip and stock; money-lending is one branch, speculation the other—baits that never fail to catch any amount of victims. I had a circular from the scoundrels last week, clever and plausible to a degree, just the kind of thing to make a schoolboy and a woman lose their heads.”

“Skinning would be too good for the brutes!” Hugh exclaimed with the hypothetical ferocity so common with the specially humane. “They deal in ruin and death besides their infernal stocks and shares. But how about Lewin? How do you know that he goes in for that sort of thing?”

“A chance word or two that he dropped to a boy who would make an average pigeon, made me sure that he was a rook. But I’ve something more than that to go upon,” and he proceeded to relate the various small causes which had produced such an effect on his mind.

Manners told him that he was a born detective, adding slyly that anything, how-

ever unpromising, did for a peg to hang a suspicion on. They parted by Charing Cross Station, as Fane had a dinner engagement in London, and Hugh was on his way to Victoria, and his home in Surrey. He went down with the Rector, who congratulated him on his return, and said many pretty things about his wife, whom he called "his model parishioner." Praise of Madge was always welcome to Hugh's ears, and he still preserved a look of satisfaction on his high-bred face when he got out of the train at Letherleigh. He was perfectly certain that he had got the best little woman in the world for his wife, but he liked to have that partial opinion endorsed by the impartial verdict of other people. It made him feel that he was a man of judgment instead of a love-sick idiot, which was pleasing to his self-respect. Mrs. Templeton, who had also come down after a day's shopping in London, advanced upon him with a friendly outstretched hand as he stepped upon the platform. She had a tall yellow feather at the back of a very low

bonnet, which nodded with every word she said, and produced rather a grotesque effect.

“So you’ve come back at last, Captain Manners. Delighted to see you!” The feather gave a pronounced nod as if to emphasise the delight. “A very good thing you *have* come back! Ah! you don’t know what has been going on in your absence.” And with a little laugh, and a knowing shake of her head, she got into the victoria which was waiting for her, and drove off.

Captain Manners raised his eyebrows as he wondered what she was driving at, and finally concluded that she was a woman who was content to chaff about anything under heaven with no foundation for her small attempt at fun to rest upon. It never crossed his mind again till he reached the Priory, and saw a bunch of violets lying on his own hall-table. It was an especially large bunch, and the scent filled the hall in an aggressive manner, as if claiming attention from all who came in. Madge was already leading him into the

garden for a late cup of tea on the terrace-walk, when his eye fell upon it, and he asked where it came from.

“Mr. Wood brought them. I should have thought that you must have met him at the gate.”

“Did he come down by the same train as I did?” he asked after a pause, whilst he was reaching after his straw hat.

“No, by an earlier one. How dusty your coat is !”

“He seems to have a slight difficulty in keeping away.” There was a tinge of sarcasm in his tone, which brought a vivid rose to her cheeks, only because of that one secret she kept from him as jealously as if it were the guiltiest known to a woman.

As he turned he saw the blush, and felt annoyed; and Mrs. Templeton’s empty chaff leapt into sudden importance.

“He often drops in on his way to the Park,” she said with that intense quietness of tone which generally betokens some inward emotion carefully suppressed, “which

is very natural ; and I think he has a heap of loose cash which he doesn't quite know what to do with, so he is glad to spend it on flowers."

"And is that natural too?" coolly, as he let himself down into a very low chair by the tea-table.

"You ought to know better than I," she said with her eyes fixed on the small silver tea-pot from which she was filling his cup.

"I never was that sort of fellow," curtly, as he took the cup from her rather tremulous hand, "and I shouldn't have given Wood credit for it either."

"You never give him credit for anything at all. You might be a Jew money-lender, and he a beggar at a crossing," she said quickly.

"I am quite willing to pass him by, as the money-lender would," at the same time refusing the bread and butter, as if he could not consent to stoop to it.

"You quite forget that he is a near relation of our greatest friends, and that he

has been very good to us ever since we first came."

"You talk as if he were a motherly old party who brought us tapioca pudding or tinned jelly as a treat on Sundays, instead of a young idiot who has no more brains than a jelly-fish, and is always ready to offer his worthless heart to the first girl he comes across."

"He has never done you any harm, so you needn't be so bitter against him," looking him straight in the face with steady eyes.

"Not he, but I think he is trying to," slowly, as he put down his cup.

"Oh! how little you know him," a gentle smile playing round her lips, as she thought of Frank's benevolent schemes. "I am sure he would go through any amount of bother to do us a service."

"To the extent of a drive round by Covent-garden, and five bob spent on a bouquet? Much obliged to him!" sarcastically. "Let him take himself and his flowers somewhere else. I don't think we want either of them here."

“Hugh!” her grey eyes flashing with indignation.

Captain Manners having nothing to add by word of mouth to what had gone before, walked off to fetch his fishing-rod. When he came out with it in his hand, he looked towards his wife with a sense of uneasiness. She always strolled along the river-bank with him, and watched his operations with keenest interest; but now her whole mind seemed to be concentrated on the *St. James' Gazette*, which could be nothing but a fraudulent pretence, for there was not a single startling event in its pages, and even if there had been, she generally preferred her husband to a sensational murder or the most sanguinary of railway accidents. For half a minute, he stood still and watched her; and then, having given her a chance which she had despised, he walked off rod in hand, drawn on by his love of sport, drawn back by marital affection. But sport carried the day, as it always does with a male biped, and he cast his fly with his usual skill, and watched for small trout with just as much eagerness

as ever. It was when he was climbing up the steep path with a few good trout in his basket, a disjointed rod, and his cast wound carelessly round his hat, that his thoughts came back to that unpleasant little talk with his wife. After all, what a fuss he had made about a trifle.

Madge was a pretty girl, and Wood was an appreciative young ass. Given these two facts, the consequences were only natural. Of course, he would drop in whenever he had the chance, and flowers would be a most innocent expression of his admiration. If Madge were as flighty as some of the women he knew, he would have to keep a sharp look-out, although it would be no good ; but as he was as sure of her as he would have been of his grandmother, if she had not predeceased him, he came to the conclusion that he had kicked up a fuss about nothing, cried "Wolf" when there was nothing to scare, or be scared, and altogether behaved like a hybrid monstrosity—something between a fool and a brute. He was not a man of many words, so he walked up to her as soon

as he had reached the terrace, laid his hand on her shoulder, and kissed her cheek.

Instantly she put back her head, and looked up into his face with glowing eyes. Her heart was full to the brim of love and thankfulness, but she had a strange fear of saying anything, lest she might bring back the cloud which had risen between them. It was the first approach to a quarrel between the husband and wife, and she looked upon it as something momentous. It had begun about an ominous subject, a subject that was all the more dangerous because it would always be rising up. It would drive her wild, as she expressed it to herself, while she seemed to be studying the evening-paper, if whenever Frank Wood came, there was to be a sarcasm on her husband's tongue, or a chill in his manner; and yet, how could she do without him? Only to-day he excited her fresh hopes by implying that he might soon be able to manage something for her. She was sure that Mr. Whiffin had some dreadful intentions about that office in San José,

and the fund which she had hidden in her dressing-case was her only hope. If Hugh knew of it, he would stop it at once, before it was large enough to do any good ; but when she was able to place a large amount in his hands, and say, "Now you can see if Mr. Whiffin won't have you for a partner," he would forgive the method by which she had acquired it, in the joy of being able to remain in Letherleigh instead of breaking up his home. He *must* forgive it, of that she had no doubt. Hugh went into the house with some prosaic remark about being late for dinner, whilst she followed with flushed cheeks and brilliant eyes, feeling thrilled to the very core of her heart by the sense of an escaped danger, deepened by the consciousness of a risk still ahead. Violet had gone back to Devonshire, so they two were alone, and they spent a very happy evening together. Hugh, sharp enough in business, though blind as any bat with regard to woman and all her special attributes, thought that Madge was merrier and more light-hearted than

he had ever seen her before. She certainly laughed and talked with a degree of excitement that was far from habitual to her; and she paid him little deprecatory attentions, the outcome of love and penitence. For though she told herself again and again that there was no harm in her secret speculations, she knew that her husband would be the last man to approve of them, and this unconfessed knowledge gave her an abiding sense of guilt. An irritating blush would dye her cheeks, if she met his steady gaze, and she felt her tongue tied as to many of her doings during her grass-widowhood, because the name of Frank Wood must inevitably crop up if she dilated on them.

The old idyllic peace of heart and home was gone, though happiness still lingered like a bird which may soon take wing, but is at present content with its nest. Madge was indeed feverishly happy that night, and felt as if she must give some outward expression to it before she forgot it in sleep. She sprang up impulsively from her chair,

and sitting down to the piano played a Tarantelle of Heller's in breathless haste. Her fingers flew over the keys, and the notes followed each other in a vivid succession of melody as if they were all running a race against time.

Hugh looked up with an amused smile. "Well done, little woman! The switch-back's not in it for pace."

"I feel better now," she said with a little laugh. "It is too idiotic to keep exclaiming 'How happy I am!' so I made the piano speak for me."

"And it did it uncommonly well," he said warmly.

When he was smoking his last pipe, he thought over the events of the day with satisfaction. There had been a little breeze, it is true, with his wife, but that had passed off quickly, and left no grumblings of storm in the air. If there had been the slightest vestige of a flirtation on his wife's part with Wood, she would have defended herself hotly from the charge, and taken trouble to be insulted by his remark about the

harm that young fellow was trying to do. It must be because she was so entirely innocent that she had passed it by so quietly, and in order to show his complete belief in his innocence, he would ask the fellow to dinner, and try to get on better terms with him. After all, there must be some good in him, or Madge would never have taken to him. Having come to this comfortable conclusion, he went to bed, and slept the sleep of the contented Benedict.

CHAPTER XIII.

“ME RUNNED AWAY.”

A BITTER cold day in January. Away out in the country the pale sun shone over the bare landscape, and seemed to accentuate the extreme sting of the north-east wind. Still there was satisfaction to be got even on such a day as this, by walking oneself into glowing heat, in spite of the keen, penetrating blast, and when the house is reached at last, by shutting the door of the favourite room—heaping on wood till the fire roars and crackles in the grate louder than the wind outside ; and then there is the deep armchair, the pipe, and the latest novel—and what could one wish for more ?

But London on such a day—oh, that is quite different ! The draughty offices, the constant swing of the door by which the

wind came rushing in, searching every nook and corner with its icy breath, the still more draughty streets, where the dust, gathered into little heaps by the wind, whirled round and round, and finally dashed with merciless force into the faces of the passers-by. The very houses looked cold, and men huddled their thick coats closer round them, and walked even faster than usual, goaded on, not only by the greed of gold, the ceaseless, breathless haste which modern business demands from its votaries, but by the cold, which nipped, and numbed, and penetrated through anything and everything. Yet that great heart of England's wealth never ceased to beat and throb. Masters or servants, heat or cold, health or weary sickness, success or dismal, heart-breaking failure, youth or old age—it matters not—they who serve in this school must work and slave always, incessantly. Truly the great Deity Mammon is a hard task-master! And so thought Osgood Lewin on this particularly bitter day, as he sat alone in his small private office, smoking a cigarette.

Lewin was ill at ease. He knew that he had reason to be so, and it annoyed him ; business was bad, money had ceased to pour in. Just now as he sat there with his chair tilted back, an open letter lay before him, the letter of a man who had saved money after hard work, but work which taught him only scholarship, not the wisdom of the world. And in an evil moment, when his life's task was nearly done, a circular had reached him through the post from Dorrien White & Co., stock and share-dealers, etc., etc., with all the old cruel deceptions which have deceived so many and which will go on doing so while there are rogues in the world, and dupes to believe in them. It all seemed so easy, the few hundreds he had saved, some of it might be used in speculation—not wild speculation—Oh, no ! That is not what “Dorrien White & Co.,” alias “Harris and Lewin,” both first-class rascals—advocated. Theirs was a cautious system—no risk beyond the amount of cover necessary to secure the stock ; and so many five, ten, and hundred

pounds came to the mill of this upright firm after the issue of this circular that, during the first half year, they realised the modest return of some thousands per cent.

And in this instance the man had muddled his simple brains by trying to understand the language of speculation, cover, options, put options, contango—and the rest. It ended as the firm intended that it should end, in his putting himself entirely into their honest hands, and his money, even to the last pound, into their hungry, capacious pockets. Now he had written a letter, wild and full of tragedy, the letter of a man who knows that he has no redress, and yet feels that he has been most cruelly treated. Poor soul! he may rot in gaol, or die the death of a suicide, for all Dorrien White cares. When will men have common sense enough to realise that if it were as easy, as certain, as these lying circulars represent it to be, to make huge profits on money laid out in speculation, those who have spent their lives learning the business of money, who know

every turn of the game, whose position on Change is as assured as long practice and obvious honesty can render it, would surely adopt these certain methods, these short cuts to wealth, if not for their clients, at any rate for themselves. Oh, the insane folly of it! But whilst there is a piper in the world there will surely be a dance, so long as one fool exists there will certainly be a knave to profit by him.

It was not this wild letter that had made Lewin uneasy, nor the few words that had just passed between himself and his partner. No, both furious letters and angry words were of daily occurrence, a passing annoyance and nothing more.

As Osgood Lewin sat and smoked, pictures of the days already dead, visions of the embryo days to come, passed before his eyes. There were many faces of vastly different kind and feature which looked in upon him at that moment, amongst them two, each taking its special place in the mental pictures which passed

softly as shadows through his brain. One was the face of a girl whom he had thought he loved—a trusting face, sweet and young, full of life and joy. He saw her in the old castle, as he had seen her long ago, moving from room to room with gentle grace in perfect happiness and peace—always bright, always welcome—a break, another scene, and he stood again before the altar of the little church and held her small hand in his, and promised to love her, and keep her in sickness and in health—till death. Death! The word changed the spirit of his dream. Death! Such a long, endless time! And with the thought of its endlessness another figure rose quickly, and came between him and her, till in the place of the downcast eyes and blushing face of Mary Douglas, he saw the more striking beauty, and the bolder glance of Eva Grenville. Oh, that marriage! What possessed him to go in for it? Was it always to come between him and his hopes? With Eva for his wife what could he not do? Then rapidly

he rehearsed the whole matter in his mind—the friendship already existing, slowly merging into something like flirtation, then onward to passionate love—his proposal, his wild delicious joy at her acceptance, his wife at last! But even as in fancy he clasped her in his arms, the pale face, the wistful, pathetic, pleading eyes of one who had been known at the castle as Mary Douglas, in another quarter as Mrs. Lewis, but who was in very truth Mrs. Osgood Lewin, came in her turn between him and his new love, and in her hand she held a little child like her, but oh, so like him as well—*his* child! He saw the full scorn of a proud, strong woman flash from Eva’s eyes—his Eva, as he called her in his dreams. It scorched him, and made him writhe in his chair.

“Oh, fool!” he muttered. “Dashed fool! for a beggar, whose only recommendation was a pretty face, to throw away all—all my whole life! It is too sickening!”

Then the thought of death recurred to him—"till death!" Why not death for *her*? What a relief for her, and him as well! Why did some people live on in spite of everything? If only she could die, and the brat whom he scarcely knew by sight. Surely Polly might die, for she was never very strong—healthy, fresh, and fair, as he remembered her once; still, the last time he saw her she looked ill, he remembered—remembered it now with exultation; she was worn and white and ill. Even in his dream just now she had seemed to him like a kill-joy or a ghost, as she had thrust herself between him and Eva. She might die! A gleam of prospective joy passed over his face, and as his thoughts travelled on, he saw a graveyard with two mounds, one so very small, side by side, and himself standing by, free, entirely free at last!

"Curse it all, it *is* hard lines!" he broke out, as he threw his cigarette away, stood up, stretched; and then, struck by a brilliant idea, exclaimed, "By Jove! I'll run down to Letherleigh and call on her." He always

called Eva "her" when talking to himself, having no need for a more positive nomenclature. "That I can do at any rate in spite of that pestering little jade at the castle."

Letherleigh was a degree more unpleasant than London on this dull day in January, and Lewin, as he walked gingerly through a sea of mud, almost regretted not having stopped at Ashmore, where he had put up his tent for the present, instead of coming on one station further, on an errand which after all could only be hopelessly tantalising, whilst things remained as they were. And then a new difficulty presented itself to worry him. What excuse should he give for this afternoon call, a civility he had taught them never to expect from him, however often they asked him to their house? It will hardly do to tell Eva, "I came here to look at you, and be with you." Lewin laughed as he thought of the effect such a plain truth would have on the girl he admired and feared at the same time. He was passing the post-office, still smiling at the thought of his imaginary speech,

when he was suddenly brought to a full stop by a voice close to him, which said :

“ You seem amused, Mr. Lewin, and what on earth can have brought you from the excitement of town to this most dreary hole in such weather as this ? ”

Eva Grenville stood on the steps of the post-office, dressed entirely in black, her jacket trimmed with rich sable, her large felt hat framing a face all aglow with health, and a colour produced by fast walking in the cold wind.

As Lewin turned, and took off his hat, he thought he had never seen her look so handsome before, the sombre hue of her dress admirably setting off the brilliance of her complexion and the bright sparkle in her eyes.

“ Miss Grenville,” he said, “ this is a pleasure I hardly looked for, though I cut business to-day on purpose to pay my respects to you and your father. I am chilled by the wind and the cold of these empty roads, and you come like an angel to cheer me.”

"You didn't look the least bit like wanting cheering; you were having a joke all to yourself," stepping down into the muddy street.

"Ah, that was because I imagined the consternation I should cause if I walked into a shop in this dead-alive place, and asked for anything of ordinary use. It is so still; I felt like an intruder. Why, your dress even fits in with the gloom. It is charming, of course, but it's black. You wear it no doubt out of respect to the dead inhabitants of this once prosperous village—or town?"

"I wear it because it suits my fancy as well as the day, and because it is extremely warm," she said, as she walked on at a steady pace. "My dad has gone to town; but if you are really coming to the Park, I promise you a roaring fire, a comfortable chair, and plenty of tea and toast. It will be a blessing to have someone to talk to on such a detestable day—and, in fact, I almost feel inclined to go out of mourning for the occasion."

Osgood Lewin felt as if the Fates were

fighting for him. Here he had come down with the bare hope of finding her at home, but if at home, knowing that she was likely to be surrounded by a crowd of chattering visitors, and doubting if he would even be sure of a welcome. Instead of which all intrusive bores were out of the way; the field was open, and he was cordially invited to a delightful *tête-à-tête*. He trod on air as he walked by her side, and the wildest hopes darted through his brain.

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Eva, stopping abruptly, and Lewin saw her eyes riveted on a little girl who was sitting on the broken step of an empty house, and sobbing, with small fists rammed against wet lashes, as if she were even then making a struggle with the last remnant of her endurance against succumbing to her trouble.

“Oh, never mind!” said Lewin carelessly. “You will see them by the dozen in London.”

Eva darted across the muddy road, and put her daintily-gloved hand on the shaking shoulders.

"What are you doing here, Jess?" she asked quickly. "Why aren't you safe at home?"

"Me runned away," came from under the bent head, the words almost quenched in a sob.

"Why did you run away?" waiting to scold till she knew the reason, whilst Lewin stood by in growing impatience.

"'Cos she beat me—nasty, wicked woman!"

"Oh my poor darling! did she hurt you?" her kind heart beginning to throb with indignation.

"Leave her alone," urged Lewin, as he thought of his promised *tête-à-tête*, endangered by that "beggar's brat," whilst the moments were flying, and Mr. Grenville's probable return brought nearer and nearer. "They all get up the same tale."

His callousness to Jess's misery brought on her former feeling against him, and she flashed upon him indignantly. "If you could leave the little thing here, you can't have a heart at all."

"I almost wish I hadn't," he growled, but Miss Grenville paid no further heed to him.

Gently, and with wonderful sweetness, she soothed the child, winding her own sable boa round and round her, to warm her shivering little body, warming the poor child's heart with words of love and tenderness. The sobs ceased, and Jessie clung to her skirt with some of her old confidence. She was hatless, having run out without time to think of anything but the smart of stinging blows, and her golden hair was towzled and uncared for, blown over her face and into her eyes by the wind. Her beauty was spoilt by her tears, but there was something inexpressibly touching to Eva in the sadness of the childish face which she had always known bright and bonnie as any sunbeam.

"Hold that!" she said imperiously to Lewin, who was watching her proceedings with evident disfavour as she put her muff into his hand. Then she stooped and picked up Jess as if she had been a bundle.

"What are you going to do with her?" he asked grumpily.

"Take her to the Park."

"I should drop her at the police-station."

"I daresay you would," loftily, "as a tramp or a pick-pocket."

"It's the best place for her," sullenly; "but if she's to be carried anywhere, you had better hand her over to me."

"You would be desperately afraid of her muddy boots," contemptuously.

"Not so afraid as I am of her being too heavy for you, and doing you some damage."

She *was* very heavy, and Eva realised that her arms were aching unpleasantly before they had gone a quarter of a mile.

"If I only hadn't been such an idiot as to counter-order the carriage!"

"Give her to me," standing resolutely in front of her.

"Will you carry her kindly, and not as if you hated the job?" looking straight into his face.

Returning look for look, he said with a

smile, "As I would if she were a diminutive copy of yourself."

Eva took no further notice of his remark than was implied by her surrender of the child, but she arranged the fur round the small head and neck till Jess looked like a bird in a nest. She was tired, and her head sank limply on her father's shoulder. He looked down on the tiny face, and said, without the smallest idea of its identity, "Not such an ugly looking beggar after all." No instinct told him that the child was his; the child born in concealment, if not actually in shame; the child whom he was bound to cherish and protect as his own life; left to the care of a brutal woman, who valued her only for the money she brought in week by week. And yet, as he held her, inwardly protesting against the burden, he thought of one with yellow hair just like this, a jolly little bit of a thing, whom he had once been idiot enough to be proud of. Where she was he really had not cared to ask. He only knew that Mary had promised to find the money for her

until he had got out of the hole in which he was placed at the moment. For half a year his affairs flourished grandly, but not a penny went on its way to the poor mother who still had to find the necessary sums out of the salary she received from the duchess; and yet this man called himself a gentleman, and was thought to be a gentleman by many because he wore a good coat!

“Run!” cried Eva excitedly, “get over the hedge, or anything! Here’s Mrs. Schonk.”

Instead of running, he stood stock still, for he had an idea that the woman who was coming towards them would be likely to relieve him of his load. Eva frowned and stamped her foot, when she saw that a meeting was inevitable. “Men never have presence of mind,” she said sweepingly, arguing as a woman will from the one poor specimen before her.

Up came Mrs. Schonk, breathless with anger and haste. “Thank you, sir,” taking Jess without ceremony from Lewin, who

gave up his child as he would have given up life and honour for his own advantage.

“The young baggage has given me such a fright as I sha’n’t get over in a hurry.”

Jess had fallen into the easy sleep of childhood, and was consequently wrapped in Mrs. Schonk’s ample shawl without making the slightest sound. All the passion and pain had gone out of the sweet little face, and she looked like a sleeping cherub. Eva looked on, her eyes flashing, her heart throbbing with indignant protest. She felt as if with her own hands she were casting the child into the hungry fangs of a she-wolf, and yet she was impotent to prevent it.

Mrs. Schonk handed her the boa without a word. Eva took it with a palpable shudder, as if it had been defiled by the woman’s touch. Then Mrs. Schonk walked off with Jess clasped tight in her resolute arms, whilst Lewin watched her retreating figure with a smile of selfish satisfaction on his thin lips, as he thought of his coming *tête-à-tête*. Eva turned upon him, a fire of indignation in her

eyes. "I believe you are *glad* to be rid of her," she said, as if she were accusing him of a crime.

"I wish to be alone with you; can you wonder?" he asked with an air of devotion.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed impatiently, feeling as if she would like to have given him a thundering box on the ears. "Run after the creature and tell her if she dares to lay a finger on the child you will give her over to the police."

"Not I. She would know I was a stranger, and I object to be laughed at."

She gave him one look that ought to have withered him like a flash of lightning, and sped off like a frightened rabbit. Pantingly she reached Mrs. Schonk, and gasped out in her haughtiest fashion: "I'll trouble you to treat this child with common humanity. If you beat her again, I'll have you put in prison."

The woman looked boldly into the girl's wrathful face, and laughed as Lewin had said she would. "You will find it uncommonly

difficult to get me there ; and I shall beat her, or not beat her, just as I choose, so there !” she added defiantly, and then she walked on, feeling that she had scored all round.

CHAPTER XIV.

BY THE COVERT-SIDE.

A SOUTH-WESTERLY wind was blowing freshly over the bare tree-tops, whilst flashes of occasional sunshine lit up the wooded slopes and deep lanes of a corner in Devonshire. Jim Bradley, the whipper-in of the "North Devon Fox-hounds" looked up at the grey sky with a critical eye, and pronounced it to be a prime morning for scent. The hounds had already been thrown off, and were now drawing a spinney, from the heart of which came every now and then a whimper from some young hound over-eager to own a line which had no existence in fact. There were many groups of horsemen and horsewomen gathered in the road outside—the Squire Arbuthnot on his steady cob, his kindly face glowing with constant exposure to wind or

sun, his eyes bright with the keen sportsman-like instinct which had grown with his growth, ever since he first put his childish foot into the stirrup which was miles too big for it. Close beside him was his little girl, Kate, on a shaggy pony, continually fretting that animal's temper by pulling at his mouth in her efforts to curb her own impatience. Next to them was the great square figure of a farmer on a big mare that seemed the counterpart of himself. He kept throwing remarks over the straggling hedge to the silver-haired Rector, who, in a long shabby coat, and a shapeless hat, watched the sport with keenest interest, his scholarly face turned towards the spinney, his thin hands clasped on the crooked handle of his stick, his boots sinking deeper and deeper into the red mud of the ploughed field in which he was standing. He had been on his daily morning round, when the huntsman's horn drew him as irresistibly as the bugle-call to the trooper to the covert-side. Not far off in a queer old-fashioned dog-cart sat his daughter Violet, whom nothing would have kept at

home when she knew that the hounds were within reach. The old grey mare was not up to much, and the whole turn-out was quite the reverse of smart, but, at least, the well-worn harness was as clean as much polishing could make it, and the girl herself, in her sailor hat and her close-fitting, high-collared jacket, was as trim and neat as the veriest dandy amongst the stray units of the field.

There was a knot of men just where the lane turned round the corner of the wood—old friends everyone of them, who had hunted together in all sorts of weather, and with all kinds of luck, year after year; and like true Englishmen, they looked askance at the stranger who pushed his way through them with the cool assurance of the typical young man of the day. It was Frank Wood who, on sport intent, and with all other interests left behind at Letherleigh in a state of transient eclipse, had run down to Devonshire to spend Christmas with some cousins near. He had felt rather out of it of late at the Priory. The feeling

had come upon him in full force on the day of Captain Manners' return, and it had never left him since. Hugh had asked him to dinner, and tried to make friends with him, but this sort of effort at friendship never succeeds, and the two men found it impossible to coalesce. Husbands are proverbially inconvenient to "droppers-in," and Frank found it difficult to talk either sense or nonsense even to a woman as pretty as Madge under the eyes of a grave man, who only smiled out of politeness at his greatest efforts of wit. The charm had gone from his visits, so he gave them up, or he thought he did; but if Hugh had been consulted, he would have told anyone "that young duffer still looked in much too often." What was fasting to Frank looked more like gorging to Manners, and yet left a great margin of discontent to the other man; and this discontent grew to such an extent that it finally drove him down to Devonshire, in the hope of getting rid of his infatuation amongst a set of hitherto neglected relations, who would

have the charm of novelty in themselves as well as in their surroundings.

At first they bored him intensely, though he called himself an ungrateful brute for not being more responsive to their kindness; but after a time, as he became mentally more detached from Letherleigh, he seemed to have more affinity with Cranleigh, and his spirits rose with a huge bound when he was able to don his well-cut black coat and his irreproachable white cords, mount his trustworthy roan, and start for whatever spot under heaven the master had fixed on for the next meet. He was entirely engrossed in the question as to whether he would have the chance of a good run, as a reward for his early start, or whether the hounds would draw a blank, as seemed but too probable, and then he raised his eyes and met the astonished gaze of another pair, which were stretched far beyond their usual width under the influence of astonishment.

His face lighted up with a perfect blaze of delight. She was Madge's sister,

at least, if she were not Madge herself, and he came forward to meet her with a degree of *empressement* which made Violet blush in a way that was unusual with her. She pulled herself together, and gave him in consequence quite a cool nod; but in the first flush of his pleasure he was not in a mood to be daunted. There was so much to say, so much to hear. Anyone looking on, and unworthily listening, might have taken them for dear friends parted for years and only just re-united. When Frank expressed his surprise at meeting Miss Fitzroy in the depths of a Devonshire lane, she told him that nothing was more natural, as the home where she had vegetated all her life was only two miles away.

“Now I might ask what brings you so far away from your centre of attraction?” she said with a particle of curiosity.

“Perhaps my centre of attraction moved first,” he said with a bow, as if he were laying the suggestion at her feet.

But she would not accept it for a moment. She had not brought him down

with her own shot, so she did not choose to stoop to pick him up.

"When you tell me where you are staying, I may be able to guess," she said with an independent air of inquiry.

"I've found out an uncle at a tumble-down sort of place close to Cranleigh. It's like a farm-house run to seed; but they've stuck on a parapet, and it blooms out into Wiverley Hall, which sounds splendatious."

"I know it," she exclaimed with an eagerness that delighted him, "and the dear old general as well."

"That's the man—General Wilder—and his wife is like a walking feather-bed, with no more will than waist. But she's a good soul, and her daughters are stout, and about as exciting as down-pillows."

"I wish they were nearer to F——," she said demurely.

"Have I made them out so attractive?" he asked, somewhat surprised.

"To me—yes. I am a person of pointed

corners, so it would be convenient for my friends to be padded."

"I never found you so," he asserted, and yet it came across him that he had, and their eyes met with a flash of laughter in each.

"Not when I first met you at the Park?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

He laughed, but answered cheerfully. "Better to be tortured than sent to sleep."

"Most people would differ from you."

"Not if they knew what was meant by the torture," with an expressive glance from his blue eyes.

The next moment a piercing view-holloa! from the furthest end of the covert, startled the echoes of the surrounding hills, made men throw away their cigars, cram their hats tight on their heads; and in the mad rush that followed in the eagerness to get into the first flight, Frank was torn from the side of the dog-cart as effectually as if he had been swept away by a torrent.

Violet and he met no more that day, for the fox made a dash for the open

country on the off-side of the wood, and gave both hounds and huntsmen a capital spin across the brown breast of the moor. The venerable mare did her level best, and the dog-cart went boldly over every bit of ground that was practicable, but they were inevitably left miles behind the greatest laggard of the field; and as the inspiriting sound of the hunt grew fainter, and still more faint in the distance, very unwillingly, and with more looks behind than were ever given by Lot's wife, Violet turned Magpie's head homewards, and thought of luncheon with an appetite that was increased by the keen wind. This meeting with Violet Fitzroy produced a wonderful change in Frank Wood. He no longer wore a disconsolate air, as if he had been accepted by a girl he loathed, or jilted by a girl that he adored. The dance at the Arbuthnots', on which he had persistently thrown cold water, and to save himself from which, he had brought up the figment of hypothetical engagement, now took the shape of a most exciting

event, to which he looked forward with a perfectly boyish interest. He had always known that Sir Thomas Arbuthnot was the Squire of F——, but this fact had seemed utterly unimportant, till he had become aware of another fact, namely, that Violet Fitzroy lived in the Rectory not more than three miles from his gates.

The half-supercilious stare with which he might have greeted the country drawing-room which had been prepared after an unsophisticated fashion for a most informal dance, never disgraced his eyes, for they were far too busy in their search for the small brown head and dainty figure which belonged to Madge's sister. When he caught sight of her at last, she was standing in a window, her pretty *piquante* face set off against the deep-toned crimson of a curtain, her bright eyes glancing every now and then into the dark face of Oliver Arbuthnot, who was listening to her with that rapt attention which men are so apt to give to the smallest nothings of a pretty girl.

He walked straight across the room, and broke into the *tête-à-tête* with his habitual audacity. The musicians were tuning up for the second waltz, so he lost no time in preliminaries, but simply bowed, and said, "Our dance, Miss Fitzroy," as if it were a registered promise.

Violet was young and inexperienced, so after one look of puzzled surprise, as if she were trying to catch hold of a memory that escaped her, she allowed herself to be entrapped into acquiescence; but when the waltz was over, and he begged her not to forget the others that she had promised him, she was her own wide-awake self in a moment, and refused to be further imposed upon. He tried to trade on the friendship between himself and her sister, but she would not seem to see, maintaining that friendship for her sister was one thing, and friendship for herself quite another, and that Oliver Arbuthnot's claim was infinitely stronger, as she had known that tall dragoon ever since he was a boy. So Frank had the mortification of being obliged to "take a

back seat," whilst waltz, polka, and galop, were absolutely lavished on the host's eldest son. If Violet had been the most determined of flirts, she could not have chosen a better method for egging on Frank Wood. He began that evening in quite a different state of mind to the one in which he ended it. When he caught sight of her standing against the window, her whole attention in the most aggravating manner given to someone else, he felt inclined to rush up to her, simply because she had once been at Letherleigh. He was thirsting for news of Mrs. Manners. Where had she spent her Christmas? What had she done about this and that? Had she taken to skating, or had she shut herself up for fear of the cold? Was she perfectly well, and was she having a good time of it up there? This was how he would have talked if he had spoken what was lying uppermost in his brain, but when they were dancing the last dance together, and he held her small hand in his grasp, whilst her bright face was only a few inches from his own, then her own

personality stood out clear and distinct from any other, and her own charm had the power of captivation, disassociated completely from that of his old friend at the Priory. Violet laughed at the fervour of his farewell, at the depth of expression in his eager eyes, as he asked when there was a chance of meeting again.

“If my brother-in-law is sent to Spain, perhaps.”

“I wish to goodness he would go and take root there like a potato,” he said with more fervour than he had often given to his prayers.

“So kind of you to wish perpetual exile for my sister. What has she done to offend you?”

“Nothing!” looking aghast as if she had spoken blasphemy. “She never would or could.”

“I know this, Mr. Wood,” with playful solemnity, “if Hugh pitches his tent in Spain, Madge will share it, and I shall have to get a little one of my own close by, because I can’t do without her, and

I won't," and she furled her fan with decision.

"My sentiments exactly, Miss Fitzroy," with cordial acquiescence in every line of his plump, good-looking face. "Wire me when you start, and I bet there will be another passenger in the same boat and train."

Then the cousins, fat and pillowy, called him for the seventh time, and he had to go.

CHAPTER XV.

OSGOOD LEWIN AS THE "CO."

THE woman who is unaccustomed to walking about London streets has quite a different air to the hardened *habituée*. She looks about as comfortable as a hare who hears the first shot in the near distance. Her senses are all on the alert, and she looks down much faster than she looks up, for the quietest stare of the oldest old gentleman brings the hot blood to her cheeks, and makes her heart throb in a quite unnecessary flurry. Madge Manners had gone through all these sensations in turn by the time she had threaded her way through the crowds in the Strand, and reached Child's Bank. But when she had given in her signature, and drawn the sum

of five pounds, the hundredth part of the small legacy which had come to Hugh by the death of his godmother, and which he had placed to his wife's account during his absence, all the experiences had to be gone through again. She was dressed in dark brown from head to foot, a well-cut tailor-made dress and jacket, and large hat adorned with a plum of feathers. The sombre tone of the colour accentuated the delicate fairness of her sweet, grave face, and set off her beauty to such an extent, that she attracted much attention even in a city which possibly contains more pretty faces than any other metropolis in Europe. No one molested her, however, for publicity was even a greater protection than her quiet dignity of manner, and she reached Victoria by means of the Metropolitan, without the smallest mishap. Fully engrossed in the wish to catch the 5.25, she looked neither to right nor left, but made for the Letherleigh platform with all the speed of great desire. Her dismay when the ticket-collector told her, with

the impassiveness of a mummy, that the train was gone, was entirely out of proportion to the event. She was sad at heart to begin with, and this seemed the last straw added to the already large burden on her young shoulders; and she turned away with an air of tribulation as if her best hope in life had departed in the van of that far too punctual train.

"My dear Mrs. Manners, what an unexpected pleasure!" exclaimed the voice of Osgood Lewin, which was far from being music to her ears, and yet was thoroughly welcome at the moment, for an object of aversion was infinitely better than nobody when she felt as forlorn as a lost lamb.

She shook hands with him more heartily than ever before, and expressed some surprise at meeting him at Victoria.

"Business brought me West. But whatever dragged you up to town on such a brutal day?" he asked in some curiosity, for the wind was enough to keep any sane person indoors who had no strong motive for going out.

"Business—simply that, and nothing else," she said with a sigh, as if pleasure were quite out of the question.

"The business of choosing a new hat, I expect," he suggested carelessly, for owing to his crass ignorance of all the higher capacities in woman, he imagined that she could have no ideas beyond finery, frivolity, and frippery.

"No, indeed," and she drew up her slight figure with a pretty air of importance. "I've been down the Strand to give my signature to a bank. My husband has been obliged to go away again—" a sigh which seemed to come from a depth far below the wooden floor of the platform was given to the absent one—"and he thought it would be convenient for me to be able to draw cheques for anything I wanted."

"Captain Manners must be a surprisingly confiding husband," something like a sneer curling his straight lip.

"Of course he can trust me, Mr. Lewin," with an air of severity.

"Or else he must have the inexhaustible

balance of a Nitrate King," passing over this remark because he saw no "of course" in the matter.

"I suppose five hundred pounds would be no more to a Nitrate King than twopence halfpenny to us," she said with a careless glance round at the book-stall, where there was a complete lull in the hurried demand for papers.

"Five hundred pounds—Great Scott!—lying idle at a bank!" he exclaimed aghast, his commercial soul revolted by such uncommercial carelessness. "What is the man thinking of?" ("infernally idiot" was in his thoughts though he kept it from his tongue). "That is wrapping up his talent in a tablecloth with a vengeance. Is he afraid of being too rich?"

Madge did not like his tone, and she showed it at once by her manner. "He only had the legacy a week ago from his god-mother," she said coldly, not reflecting that she was giving much unnecessary information to a man whom she always distrusted. "There was no time to do

anything with it before he started, even if there was anything to be done."

"There is always something to be done," sententiously, biting his lips as he thought of this money, thrown away like a seed which has been forgotten to be sown. "If it had come to me, by the first post before four o'clock of the same day it would have started on its work of duplication. But," with a shrug of his shoulders, "I suppose Captain Manners can afford to throw away his chances."

"Indeed, you never made a greater mistake." There was bitterness in her tone as she thought of his being torn away from her again, simply because his poverty left him at Mr. Whiffin's beck and call. "And as for me," speaking in a low but very distinct voice, vibrating with the earnestness of her longing, "I don't suppose that there is a woman in England more eager to make money than I am at this moment. It sounds very bad, but it's the truth," she added, with a weary little smile as she listlessly drew her

husband's initials on the floor with the point of her umbrella.

"It sounds like common sense, which I don't often give a woman credit for. Well, Mrs. Manners, if I had a few loose hundreds lying so handy," his heart squirmed within him as he thought of them, "I would make a shy at Fortune, and see if I couldn't bring her down. I would, upon my word."

"Ah, if I only could!"

"Nothing easier. But," thinking it wise to draw back in order more effectually to draw her on, "ladies, I know, have a supreme contempt for business, as well as for business men, so I had better shut up. Let's change the subject," airily. "Going down by the 6.10?"

"Yes, I have no choice."

"You missed the 5.25 I suppose, same as I did?" he asked though he had seen her breathless arrival at the closed gate. "We are companions in misfortune, let us be companions in the train as well. (Madge bowed a careless assent.) I am running

down to Ashmore, next station, you know, so I shall see you nearly to your journey's end."

Just at that moment up came Mr. Grenville, greeting Madge in his genial fashion, and taking entire possession of her, much to Lewin's disgust. He knew that his arrival gave a death-blow to all hopes of the *tête-à-tête* from which he had meant to derive much profit; but at the same time he concealed every sign of mortification with the greatest care. When the train at last condescended to glide up the side of the platform, he said, "I resign you into better hands," took off his hat, and jumped into the nearest smoking carriage, having sighted a more exalted quarry. This king of the herd was the young mother-beridden Duke of Edenbridge, who, having escaped from the maternal eye, was as welcome a sight to Osgood Lewin as the finest salmon that ever tantalised the most enthusiastic fisherman on the waters of Loch Lomond. Lewin had never seen him since the Oaks, when Fane's diplomacy made him

lose the bet which he had with Manners on the result of his interference with Edenbridge's flirtation. He chose to consider that the duke was accountable to him for the loss of that tenner, because he had given way like a lamb instead of "cutting up rough" as he could have sworn he would, and sending the meddling fellow about his business; and he meant to get it back—*with interest*.

Hugh Manners' five hundred dropped into utter insignificance as he gloated over the thought of the other man's thousands. There would be very good pickings for a sharp fellow who managed to get at them—excellent pickings which would make Harris's greedy mouth water, and take the edge off his temper for a month of unwonted urbanity. And Edenbridge had behaved like a cad to him, cast him off like a discarded coat at a word from that cranky old hag, his mother. He owed him something for that, and, by George! no squeamish scruples about old friendship need stand between him and his revenge. Fellows with a large and insured income can afford

scruples ; but they are too great a luxury for the others, who have nothing to depend on but their wits, a most unstable foundation on which to take a stand, or found a position.

As he disappeared into the next carriage, Madge cast a regretful glance at his retreating figure. Perhaps he might have been of some use to her, she thought vaguely, now that Mr. Wood seemed to have failed. And she was reduced to such a pass by this second visit of Hugh's to Spain, that she felt inclined to employ the most casual acquaintance to accomplish her end, if he were good enough to place his services at her disposal. Mr. Grenville was distressed to see how pale and down-hearted she looked, and told her cheerily that she must make the Park her home so long as she was alone.

"Eva is wild about this election business," he went on, in the hope of distracting her thoughts from her absent husband. "We must expect to get no good out of her for the next month or so. She is spending a

fortune on orange ribbon, writing speeches by the yard, to be spouted by somebody else at the next meeting, and working herself up into a frenzy of excitement before the fray begins."

"But I don't understand," and Madge looked up with puzzled eyes. "Hugh said it would be a walk over."

"So we all thought. We imagined that Sir Adrian had nothing to do but to get out of his seat, and let Fane take his place, as quietly as if we were in church, when up starts a little whipper-snapper of a man, who dares to contest the election."

"What a shame!" exclaimed Madge with the fine impartiality of a feminine politician. "A Fane has been member for this part of Surrey for fifty years."

Neither of them noticed how a curly black head was lifted over the edge of an *Evening Star* in the opposite corner of the carriage, or that a foot in a patent leather boot began to tap the floor impatiently.

"Quite true," assented Josiah Grenville,

"and there isn't a doubt that a Fane ought to go on till the end of the chapter. Such confounded impudence I call it. The fellow has only pushed himself to the front by bluster and bounce."

"Excuse me, sir," interposed an agitated voice from the corner, "but I suppose you don't know that you are talking of *me*?"

Most men would have been considerably embarrassed, but Mr. Grenville wheeled round, and looked calmly into the flushed face of the speaker.

"No, sir, I was not aware of it, and I beg to apologise. I only know you through your address in the columns of the local paper."

"Perhaps you will be good enough to withdraw your statement?" bristling defiance in every line of the thick-lipped, small-eyed, and large-nosed countenance of Mr. Peregrine Courtman.

"When I find out that your actions are the exact reverse of your words, I shall do so with pleasure," Mr. Grenville said

quietly ; "till then, you will agree with me that it would be rather premature."

"I'm dashed if I see it, sir," Mr. Courtman said explosively, with dynamite in his eyes.

Providentially the train stopped that identical minute at Letherleigh, and Madge hopped out as nimbly as a kitten. She went on fast as if she were in a desperate hurry, and took her place in Grenville's phaeton as soon as it was offered to her. He was therefore obliged out of politeness to hurry over his own arrangements, but he looked over his shoulder, still ready to fight if the embryo M.P. felt disposed. Probably the presence of a lady had a restraining effect, for the latter contented himself with growling out strong language to a porter who presumed to be slow over the conveyance of his portmanteau to the waiting fly, whilst Mr. Grenville drove off chuckling.

Madge saw nothing and heard as little of Osgood Lewin ; but a few days after their meeting at Victoria, she received a circular from Messrs. Dorrien White & Co.,

Arundel Street, Strand, a circular in which they set forth in glowing terms all the advantages to be gained by dealing with a firm whose motto, always and under all circumstances, was "Honesty is the best policy." Madge read it with intense interest, which showed itself in parted lips and dilated eyes. Really if she believed what they said—and how could she be uncharitable enough to doubt them?—it seemed as if gain were secured as an absolute certainty, and loss reduced to only a fractional possibility. She saw a five-pound starting on its way—a modest five-pound such as she had in her purse at that moment—but having in itself the germ of a large fortune. It seemed almost as wonderful as the tiny bioplast which is the small beginning of the greatest man that ever lived. If that miracle performs itself countless times through all the centuries of organic life, why should not the same principle be carried out in money, directed and sent on its reduplicating way by the sagacity of a being who has grown into manhood from a tiny unimportant speck?

There were altogether so many things which she could not understand but which were undoubtedly true, which she had to believe whether she understood them or not, that she could not see why she should reserve her whole stock of scepticism for a set of people who seemed willing to explain their method in plainest business language, which any man would be sure to comprehend ; and who only offered a chance to the world in general, which the world might refuse or not just as it thought best. She felt inclined to write to them at once, but thought it more prudent to wait till she had spoken to Frank Wood, or even Mr. Lewin. She knew instinctively that the one would throw cold water on the whole thing at once, whilst the other would probably imply that she would be a lunatic if she did not begin negotiations at once. Woman-like, though she could trust Wood implicitly, and Lewin no further than she could see him, she yet felt more disposed to consult the latter, because his opinion would run on the same set of rails as her own. For the present

she locked the circular up in her own desk with her husband's last letters and other precious trifles, which was like introducing a claw into a nest of doves.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE TOILS.

“HOPE deferred maketh the heart sick”—a truism, the force of which poor Madge had ample opportunity of realising, as day by day she waited and longed for Hugh’s return from Spain, and disappointment followed on the heels of disappointment. His letters were frequent but short—business, he said, was certainly improving, but at present very pressing—he hoped soon, however, so to have settled matters to the satisfaction of his firm that no further absence from home would be necessary for many a long day to come. “Much better,” he added, “one long absence than constant partings always recurring—a repetition of agony, each one worse than the last.” So as every letter came Madge found herself

doomed to further periods of loneliness, and "It never rains but it pours," this fact also being obviously demonstrated in her enforced widowhood. Before Hugh left all had been arranged for Violet to come and stay at the Priory, but at the last, on the very day that she was expected, a letter came telling of disaster in the shape of a sharp attack of mumps contracted by her little sister, Janet, whilst playing with the children of a certain Mrs. Black. The mother, with that fine disregard for consequences to others so prevalent amongst the very poor, had allowed her children, whilst suffering from that unpleasant but painful complaint, to mix with all the other children of the neighbourhood at a school-treat, with the result that it ran like an epidemic through the village, claiming Janet Fitzroy as one of its first victims. Now Madge had taken great pains with the preparation of the room which Violet was to occupy, and she was employed in giving the last loving touches to it, as only a woman can, when a letter from Devonshire

was put into her hands. When she realised its purport blank dismay bordering on despair was the result, followed as it generally is by unreasonable anger with Janet, Violet, the unfortunate baby Black, Hugh, and all the world, not even excluding Providence—concluding by its natural sequence, a burst of most relieving tears. Poor little soul! the house seemed more lonely than ever, the depression was accentuated to a degree almost past bearing; and when, as proved to be the case, Violet caught the hateful malady from her little sister, her cup of bitterness was full to the brim. Madge was one whose spirits easily revived, for she had plenty of pluck; but it must be acknowledged that circumstances were cruelly hard upon her at this time. Godfrey Fane's election engrossed the whole attention of the two cousins, Eva and Frank. She hardly saw them, and when she did, their talk was of nothing but canvassing, speechifying, and dodges to win votes. The entire neighbourhood

was absorbed in the fight for Parliamentary honours going on between that extremely popular, generous-minded English gentleman, Godfrey Fane, who, by the by seemed to care less about the result than anyone else concerned, and his caddish, choleric, but desperately in earnest antagonist, Peregrine Courtman. So Madge was left much alone through force of circumstances, over which she had no control, but which, nevertheless, exercised a most important influence on her hitherto happy young life. It is singular with what persistency some women and most clergymen cherish the idea that business, especially when money is the stock-in-trade, means financial success. They seem to be drawn like the unhappy bird fascinated by a snake into the very jaws of ruin, and often of disgrace. How many a poor parish priest, with plenty of olive-branches round his table, and consequently many hungry mouths to feed, instead of burning that circular issued by Messrs. Shark & Co., without the knowledge of Mrs. —,

forwards a precious five-pound note to cover five hundred pounds of stock, with full powers to these philanthropic gentlemen to use the remittance as they think best, which Mr. Shark, who is also sometimes the Co. as well, is most ready and willing to do, and he does it by promptly pocketing the five pounds, and in a very short time writing for more cover.

And so the old world-worn folly goes on. Now Madge had much time for thought, and the subject of thought in fact was provided for her—money, and how to make it. Why should Hugh have to slave for it, when men like Mr. Wood seemed to make it with such ease? True, he had told her that it was not so easy as she thought. She had trusted him so, and now he never spoke to her about business. Then for the hundredth time, she took out of her desk the last circular which Messrs. Dorrien White & Co. had enclosed to her a few days ago, with such kindness, such thoughtfulness, such a real desire for her happiness and welfare! This was by

no means the only circular which had reached her from the same disinterested firm; every week brought some paper containing glowing accounts of the success of the last syndicate, or still further details of how money might be made without any appreciable risk; and she would have been ready to have given almost anything for sufficient courage to ask Frank Wood for his advice. The natural course would have been to enclose one of the circulars to her husband and beg for his opinion; but she put all thought of consulting Hugh at once on one side, not only because she felt intuitively that he would tell her to have nothing to do with speculation, but also because it would divulge her secret, and destroy all chance of a dramatic surprise.

On this particular day she was in better spirits than she had been for some time, having received a cheerful letter from Hugh, as well as a short note from Violet, saying that she hoped soon to be quite convalescent and able to pay her long promised visit, so when Anne announced—"Mr. Osgood

Lewin," she rose with a degree of warmth to make him welcome, which even surprised herself.

"Oh, Mr. Lewin, I am so glad to see you. This horrid election banishes all my friends, and it is so good of you to come and cheer up my loneliness."

"I assure you, Mrs. Manners, the pleasure is all on my side," he answered suavely, "though I must confess you disappoint me when you talk of being still alone. I hoped very much to find Captain Manners at home. They assured me in the city that I should see him if I came down here." Mr. Lewin had, as a matter-of-fact, taken the greatest possible care to discover whether Captain Manners had returned, or would be likely to do so before he ventured to call at the Priory; but such a misstatement as this was only part of his method of doing business.

"Indeed I am afraid my husband won't be back for some days," she said ruefully. "Can I give him any message? I shall be writing to-night."

“By no means, I won’t trouble you;” the very idea made him cold. “The fact is,” he went on, “I have a regard for your husband, and I should like to have told him of a little matter of business which has come to my knowledge, by which I think I could put him in the way of making some money.”

“Oh! do let me write to him,” fixing her earnest eyes on him. “Hugh would be only too pleased.”

“Quite useless, Mrs. Manners. The whole thing will be over long before your letter could arrive in Spain. You know, or probably you don’t know,” he said with a smile, “that money is very quickly made in these transactions on the Stock Exchange.”

“I am so sorry, but—” and here she hesitated, “I have a little money of my own, and you know if I could be of any use—if I could in any way help Hugh, I should be so pleased—so happy,” she said fervently. “But it is very, very little,” she added quickly.

“My dear Mrs. Manners, I am afraid you would hardly be able to undertake the matter. You see,” looking down on her beautiful upturned face, with his crafty smile, “a knowledge of business is absolutely necessary, and that you are not likely to have.”

“But indeed, Mr. Lewin,” her face still all aglow with hope, “I have already done one stroke of business by the help of a friend of mine, and made one hundred and twenty pounds out of thirty all at one time; and since then, I’ve been thirsting for another chance. I have had several circulars lately from people of the name of Dorrien White & Co. I know nothing about them, but it seems to me that I couldn’t lose by following their advice.”

This was just what Lewin had been leading up to, and he gave an inward chuckle as he leant forward, and said with an air of pleased surprise: “Now, that is most curious; it was through them that I heard of this matter. Most reliable men, everyone would tell you the same. You

could not do better than trust them with a commission. You had better know all that I've heard from them. A diamond mine has been discovered in that little island in the Pacific lately annexed by us. Not a soul knows of it but Dorrien White & Co., who bought up the land as soon as the Union Jack was planted on the shore. Being a personal friend of one of the partners, they offered me shares at a ridiculously low price, and they may still be had privately for five pounds, but as soon as the public get wind of it, they will go up with a bound to eighty, a hundred, or probably even higher."

Maude positively gasped. To be able to get for five pounds anything that might cost eighty or a hundred seemed perfectly miraculous. "Oh, Mr. Lewin," she cried, her eyes shining with eagerness, "I should be so awfully grateful if you would take my money, and get me some of these shares. I should never be able to thank you enough."

She looked inexpressibly winning, as

she made her foolish request, and any other man than the cold-blooded scoundrel before her might have hesitated to take advantage of her; but wherever his self-interest was concerned, Lewin, like a few of his fellow-creatures, was perfectly invulnerable.

“It would give me the greatest pleasure to help you in any way,” he said with the utmost veracity, always supposing that the “help” was according to his own definition of it; “and, of course, if you are bent on it, I don’t think you could do better than to allow me to invest your money in these diamond mines; but, you know, there is always some risk,” he added as a sort of sop to his much-tried conscience.

And so it came to pass that poor Madge got into the hands of Dorrien White & Co. It was the natural sequence of desire grown through indulgence into the master-passion of her life. Desire drew her nearer and nearer to the men who promised fruition, and after the first there was not much

halting by the way. Fifty pounds went, and then again fifty, Lewin representing, or rather misrepresenting, the crisis through which the stock was passing, the certainty of ultimate success, the absolute necessity of constantly supporting her first investment by fresh purchase ; all of which was quite unintelligible to Madge, as indeed half he said had no meaning whatever. Still he kept her in high hopes of what could never be, and thus extracted from her more and more, till her own hundred and twenty was gone, and Captain Manners' five hundred had been laid under heavy contribution. Of course all this was to be paid back long before he returned, and the original amount redoubled, if not trebled and quadrupled.

Her conscience began to trouble her. She could not sleep at night for thinking of that money. Why was there never any return ? Why was she always being asked for more ? Oh how she wished that she had never touched it ? To have her own nest-egg safe would have been

worth much, but how much more delightful to be freed from the consciousness that she was wasting—what a terrible crime! actually *wasting*—the sum of money belonging to her husband, which would go, as he said, some way towards buying him a partnership? Thus he had shared her thought but not her action, and what an awful difference that made! She would insist upon Mr. Lewin's settling up her account with Dorrien White & Co. They must be cheating her, ah! but then she would lose everything, all her own, and two hundred of Hugh's!

It could not be—it must not be! What would she say to him, after all his love and his trust; how could she meet him with the news that she had robbed him in his absence? It was too much, she could not bear it; and then she buried her face in her pillow, and poured out her aching heart in tears that brought no relief, till tired out, she fell asleep, only to dream of a long, long street in London—black and dark—a darkness that was tangible to her

senses, and she hurried on alone, and yet never alone. Voices called from the darkness, skeleton hands seemed to touch her as she went on, and the voices all said the same thing, "Money—money—money," only varied by a chorus of "Lost—lost—lost." Suddenly she saw amongst those dingy houses one whose front blazed and shimmered and scintillated with light, and a benevolent old man stood at the door, who beckoned her to him and asked what she wanted. Then she looked up and saw with delight the name of Dorrien White & Co. above her head, and knew that she had found the man she wanted. "Oh, sir, my money," she cried in her sleep, and he said to her, "Go in, take all you can." And she went and found a room full of gold—nothing but gold—gold everywhere. She cried with joy, and ran to gather it up in great handfuls, when suddenly all the gold slipped away, and she found her hands full of ashes, and Lewin stood by, and said: "It will all come right, only I must have more money." In her bitter

rage and disappointment she turned to throw the ashes in his face, but as she turned, she saw Hugh looking at her with tender reproach in his eyes, whilst his lips repeated the same words as the hollow tones of the phantoms, "Money—money," "Lost—lost." With a wild cry for mercy, she woke, poor child, only to find that life was almost as unbearable as her dream ; nothing could do away with the desperate fact, that her own money was gone, and two hundred of Hugh's as well.

END OF VOL. II.



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